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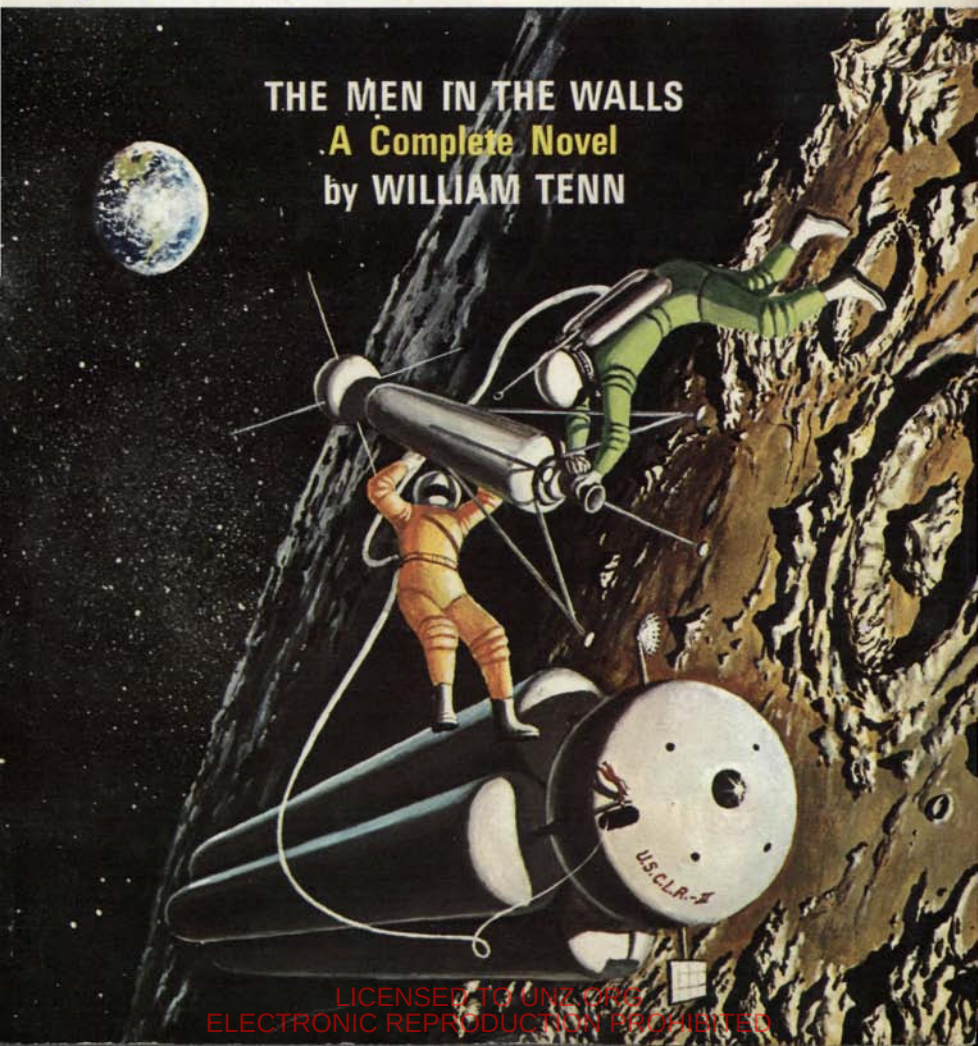

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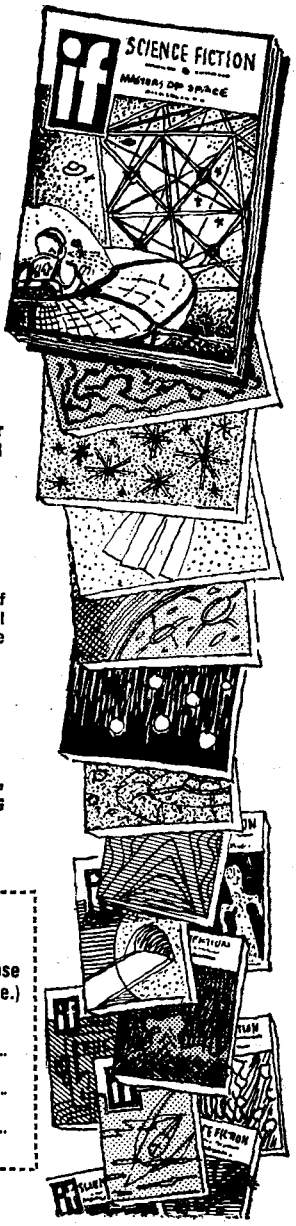

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WHAT'S THE SCORE?

AN EASY card game for very young children is "Slapjack". It is played with a 52-card deck, but it doesn't have much in common with contract bridge or poker. You take a deck of cards, divide it more or less in half and turn the cards up one at a time. Every time a jack turns up, the players try to slap it. First player to get his palm over it wins that round.

Tic-Tac-Toe represents a second stage in complexity. As a game for young children it has several merits, both as a way of passing a rainy day and as a sort of rough-hewn test of intelligence or of maturity, since the age at which the player learns that the outcome of the game can be controlled completely — that chance has no part in it, and that all of its strategies can be learned and simply expressed — is also about the age at which he learns that he need not *always* consider the ordinances of Mommy and Daddy to be Divine Law.

Slightly later, and considerably more challenging, checkers gets added to the list. In the Games Theory view of checkers it can be considered as a zero-sum game with finite choices. That is, when one player wins, the other loses; and the number of possible responses to any move is rather easily calculated. Chess is still more complex, for, although the

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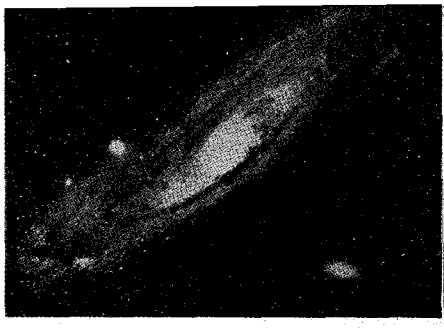

OCTOBER, 1963 • VOL. 22, NO. 1

CONTENTS

COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

THE MEN IN THE WALLS 8
by William Tenn

NOVELETTES

ON THE GEM PLANET 92
by Cordwainer Smith

A DAY ON DEATH HIGHWAY 124
by Chandler Elliott

MED SHIP MAN 156
by Murray Leinster

SHORT STORY

SWEET TOOTH 145
by Robert F. Young

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

FOR YOUR INFORMATION 85
by Willy Ley

FEATURES

EDITOR'S PAGE 4
by Frederik Pohl

FORECAST 83

GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF 119
by Floyd C. Gale

Cover by DEMBER

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outcome is unquestionably controllable, in practice the human mind is not capable of memorizing all of the possible moves and their consequences, so that the expert player falls back on what is called "position evaluation." The strategy of a Botvinnik or a Capablanca is not aimed directly toward winning. It is aimed toward securing a board position and a favorable balance of forces such that winning then becomes inevitable. That may sound at first blush like a distinction without a difference; but in fact it is the difference between, say, the single combat of medieval knights and modern war.

It doesn't much matter whether you play chess poorly or well; if you try to play it at all, you are a long way from Slapjack.

THE HISTORY of man's attempt to control his environment — by which we can include everything from pulling a branch over himself in a rainstorm to the framing of the law of conservation of parity — passes through an evolution rather like the development of an individual's mastery of games. Paleolithic man was in the Slapjack period: If any feature of his environment gave him trouble, he whanged at it until one of two things happened. Either he suddenly discovered he had a pretty good obsidian knife, or he gave up. Modern man, or so we like to think, has pretty well caught the hang of the "chess" approach to solving his problems. He is still playing a game. But it is a larger game, in a different context.

When we say that the progress of scientific knowledge is measured by the enlargement of contexts, we are saying that we advance by learning truths which are more general than the truths we knew before. We frame empirical "laws" — the law of Conservation of Energy — and somebody draws from them still other laws (as did Carnot and the rest of the great mechanist-minded scientists) . . . until some other person, trying to understand why these laws should be so, frames a still more general law (as did Einstein) and we find, by gosh, that our first law isn't really a law at all. Energy can so be created — by transformation from matter; and it can be destroyed by transformation in the other direction.

This does not mean that the previous laws are false, thus destroying the deductions made from them: Carnot's model of a heat engine still works perfectly. The laws are still true, in terms of the contexts then existing; but now they are only special cases within larger laws.

You can, if you like, compare

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this enlargement of contexts with a mastery of increasingly sophisticated games. Slapjack to Tic-Tac-Toe: from the planless fumbling of primitive man to the learned-by-rote "medicine", say, of Hippocrates. Tic-Tac-Toe to checkers: from the Hippocratic empirical remedies to the experimentation and theorizing of Galen. Checkers to chess: from Galen's dissection of corpses to antibiotics and the analysis of DNA.

All this is analogy and perhaps a little strained, for nothing is more deadly than to force conclusions from an analogy. But perhaps it is not *just* an analogy; for science is itself a sort of game.

THINK OF science as a game board, and think of a very large, very complex computer across the board from us as our Opponent.

The Opponent never cheats. He plays according to our rules. He plays the games we teach him. If we are playing the game called Chemistry, he will go pokerfaced along with the rules — all the rules — including the rule that elements cannot be transmuted one to the other. If you want one of the moves in the game to be the change of uranium into lead, you have to change the game, to one variety or another of the game called Physics. If you are playing the game called Euclidean geometry, the Opponent won't let you trisect an angle. If you want to do that you must switch to the game called algebra, where you can trisect all the angles you like with a simple cubic equation. And behold! that which was impossible, and which everybody knew to be impossible, and which was *proved* to be impossible . . . is no longer impossible at all.

All you have to do is change the game.

It is this point that is so hard to get across to the sort of closed mind that says, "We know that ESP is impossible" or "We have proved that no material object can be accelerated past the velocity of light in a vacuum." In fact, we do not know anything of the kind. We only know that the rules of the games we're playing today say so; but we do not know, and can only with difficulty imagine, the rules of the games we may play tomorrow.

That, of course, is the thing, or one of the things, that science fiction is all about.

A science-fiction story we must admit is only a game, sugar-coated with adventure, touched with humor, scented with romance. Games they are — but who is to say that some day soon we won't be playing some of them for keeps?

— **FREDERIK POHL**

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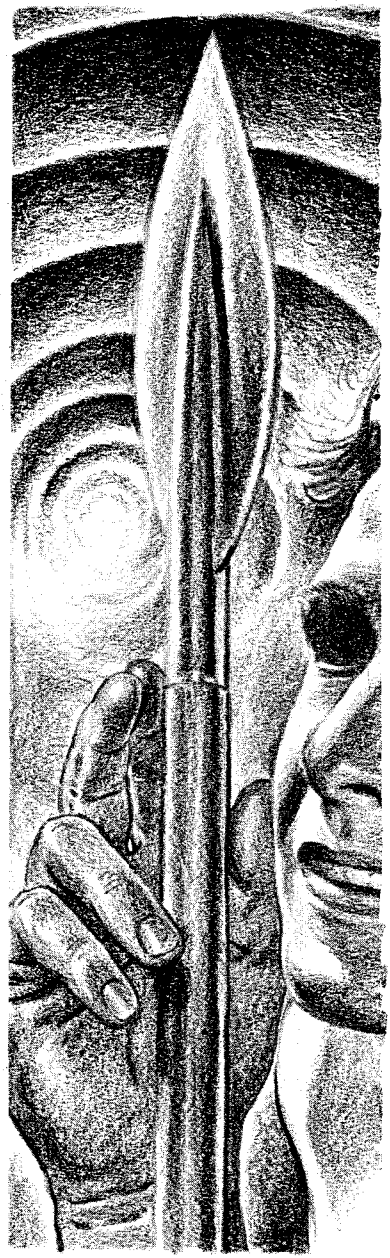
The world was divided between the Men and the Monsters — but which were Monsters and which were Men?

THE MEN IN THE WALLS

By WILLIAM TENN

Illustrated by FINLAY



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I

MANKIND consisted of 128 people.

The sheer population pressure of so vast a horde had long ago filled over a dozen burrows. Bands of the Male Society occupied the outermost four of these interconnected corridors and patrolled it with their full strength, twenty-three young adult males in the prime of courage and alertness. They were stationed there to take the first shock of any danger to Mankind, they and their band captains and the youthful initiates who served them.

Eric the Only was an initiate in this powerful force. Today, he was a student warrior, a fetcher and a carrier for proven, seasoned men. But tomorrow, tomorrow . . .

This was his birthday. Tomorrow, he would be sent forth to Steal for Mankind. When he returned — and have no fear: Eric was swift, Eric was clever, he would return — off might go the loose loin cloths of boyhood to be replaced by the tight loin straps of a proud Male Society warrior.

He would be free to raise his voice and express his opinions in the Councils of Mankind. He could stare at the women when-

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ever he liked, for as long as he liked, to approach them even —

He found himself wandering to the end of his band's burrow, still carrying the spear he was sharpening for his uncle. There, where a women's burrow began, several members of the Female Society were preparing food stolen from the Monster larder that very day. Each spell had to be performed properly, each incantation said just right, or it would not be fit to eat. It might even be dangerous. Mankind was indeed fortunate: plenty of food, readily available, and women who well understood the magical work of preparing it for human consumption.

And such women — such splendid creatures!

Sarah the Sickness-Healer, for example, with her incredible knowledge of what food was fit and what was unfit, her only garment a cloud of hair that alternately screened and revealed her hips and breasts, the largest in all Mankind. There was a woman for you! Over five litters she had had, two of them of maximum size.

Eric watched as she turned a yellow chunk of food around and around under the glow lamp hanging from the ceiling of the burrow, looking for she only knew what and recognizing it when she found it she only knew how. A man could really strut with such a mate.

But she was the wife of a band leader and far, far beyond him. Her daughter, though, Selma the Soft-Skinned, would probably be flattered by his attentions. She still wore her hair in a heavy bun: it would be at least a year before the Female Society would consider her an initiate and allow her to drape it about her nakedness. No, far too young and unimportant for a man on the very verge of warrior status.

Another girl caught his eye. She had been observing him for some time and smiling behind her lashes, behind her demurely set mouth. Harriet the History-Teller, the oldest daughter of Rita the Record-Keeper, who would one day succeed to her mother's office. Now there was a lovely, slender girl, her hair completely unwound in testament to full womanhood and recognized professional status.

ERIC had caught these covert, barely stated smiles from her before; especially in the last few weeks, as the time for his Theft approached. He knew that if he were successful — and he *had* to be successful: don't dare think of anything but success! — she would look with favor on advances from him. Of course, Harriet was a redhead, and therefore,

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according to Mankind's traditions, unlucky. She was probably having a hard time finding a mate. But his own mother had been a redhead.

Yes, and his mother had been very unlucky indeed.

Even his father had been infected with her terrible bad luck. Still, Harriet the History-Teller was an important person in the tribe for one her age. Good-looking too. And, above all, she didn't turn away from him. She smiled at him, openly now. He smiled back.

"Look at Eric!" he heard someone call out behind him. "He's already searching for a mate. Hey, Eric! You've not even wearing straps yet. First comes the stealing. *Then* comes the mating."

Eric spun around, bits of fantasy still stuck to his lips.

The group of young men lounging against the wall of his band's burrow were tossing laughter back and forth between them. They were all adults: they had all made their Theft. Socially, they were still his superiors. His only recourse was cold dignity.

"I know that," he began. "There is no mating until —"

"Until never for some people," one of the young men broke in. He rattled his spear in his hand, carelessly, proudly. "After you steal, you still have to convince a woman that you're a man. And some men have to do an awful lot of convincing. An *awful* lot, Eric-O."

The ball of laughter bounced back and forth again, heavier than before. Eric the Only felt his face turn bright red. How dare they remind him of his birth? On this day of all days? Here he was about to prepare himself to go forth and Steal for Mankind . . .

He dropped the sharpening stone into his pouch and slid his right hand back along his uncle's spear. "At least," he said, slowly and definitely, "at least, my woman will stay convinced, Roy the Runner. She won't be always open to offers from every other man in the tribe."

"You lousy little throwback!" Roy the Runner yelled. He leaped away from the rest of the band and into a crouch facing Eric, his spear tense in one hand. "You're asking for a hole in the belly! My woman's had two litters off me, two big litters. What would you have given her, you dirty singleton?"

"She's had two litters, but not off you," Eric the Only spat, holding his spear out in the guard position. "If you're the father, then the chief's blonde hair is contagious — like measles."

Roy bellowed and jabbed his spear forward. Eric parried it and lunged in his turn. He missed as

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his opponent leaped to one side. They circled each other, cursing and insulting, eyes only for the point of each other's spears. The other young men had scrambled a distance down the burrow to get out of their way.

A POWERFUL arm suddenly clamped Eric's waist from behind and lifted him off his feet. He was kicked hard, so that he stumbled a half-dozen steps and fell. On his feet in a moment, the spear still in his hand, he whirled, ready to deal with this new opponent. He was mad enough to fight all Mankind.

But not Thomas the Trap-Smasher. No, not that mad.

All the tension drained out of him as he recognized the captain of his band. He couldn't fight Thomas. His uncle. And the greatest of all men. Guiltily, he walked to the niche in the wall where the band's weapons were stacked and slid his uncle's spear into its appointed place.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Roy?" Thomas was asking behind him. "Fighting a duel with an initiate? Where's your band spirit? That's all we need these days, to be cut down from six effectives to five. Save your spear for Strangers, or — if you feel very brave — for Monsters. But don't show a point in our band's burrow if you know what's good for you, hear me?"

"I wasn't fighting a duel," the Runner mumbled, sheathing his own spear. "The kid got above himself. I was punishing him."

"You punish with the haft of the spear. And anyway, this is my band and I do the punishing around here. Now move on out, all of you, and get ready for the council. I'll attend to the boy myself."

They went off obediently without looking back. The Trap-Smasher's band was famous for its discipline throughout the length and breadth of Mankind. A proud thing to be a member of it. But to be called a boy in front of the others! A boy, when he was full-grown and ready to begin stealing!

Although, come to think of it, he'd rather be called a boy than a singleton. A boy eventually became a man, but a singleton stayed a singleton forever. He put the problem to his uncle who was at the niche, inspecting the band's reserve pile of spears.

"Isn't it possible — I mean, it is possible, isn't it — that my father had some children by another woman? You told me he was one of the best thieves we ever had."

The captain of the band turned to study him, folding his arms across his chest so that biceps swelled into greatness and power.

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They glinted in the light of the tiny lantern bound to his forehead, the glow lantern that only fully accredited warriors might wear. After a while, the older man shook his head and said, very gently:

"Eric, Eric, forget about it, boy. He was all of those things and more. Your father was famous. Eric the Storeroom-Stormer, we called him, Eric the Laugher at Locks, Eric the Roistering Robber of all Mankind. He taught me everything I know. But he only married once. And if any other woman ever played around with him, she's been careful to keep it a secret. Now dress up those spears. You've let them get all sloppy. Butts together, that's the way, points up and even with each other."

DUTIFULLY, Eric rearranged the bundle of armament that was his responsibility. He turned to his uncle again, now examining the knapsacks and canteens that would be carried on the expedition. "Suppose there had been another woman. My father could have had two, three, even four litters by different women. Extra-large litters too. If we could prove something like that, I wouldn't be a singleton any more. I would not be Eric the Only."

The Trap-Smasher sighed and thought for a moment. Then he pulled the spear from his back sling and took Eric's arm. He drew the youth along the burrow until they stood alone in the very center of it. He looked carefully at the exits at either end, making certain that they were completely alone before giving his reply in an unusually low, guarded voice.

"We'd never be able to prove anything like that. If you don't want to be Eric the Only, if you want to be Eric the something-else, well then, it's up to you. You have to make a good Theft. That's what you should be thinking about all the time now — your Theft. Eric, which category are you going to announce?"

He hadn't thought about it very much. "The usual one I guess. The one that's picked for most initiations. First category."

The older man brought his lips together, looking dissatisfied. "First category. *Food*. Well . . ."

Eric felt he understood. "You mean, for someone like me — an Only, who's really got to make a name for himself — I ought to announce like a real warrior? I should say I'm going to steal in the second category — Articles Useful to Mankind. Is that what my father would have done?"

"Do you know what your father would have done?"

"No. What?" Eric demanded eagerly.

"He'd have elected the third

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category. That's what I'd be announcing these days, if I were going through an initiation ceremony. That's what I want you to announce."

"Third category? Monster souvenirs? But no one's elected the third category in I don't know how many auld lang synes. Why should I do it?"

"Because this is more than just an initiation ceremony. It could be the beginning of a new life for all of us."

Eric frowned. What could be more than an initiation ceremony and his attainment of full thieving manhood?

"There are things going on in Mankind, these days," Thomas the Trap-Smasher continued in a strange, urgent voice. "Big things. And you're going to be a part of them. This Theft of yours — if you handle it right, if you do what I tell you, it's likely to blow the lid off everything the chief has been sitting on."

"The *chief?*" Eric felt confused. He was walking up a strange burrow now without a glow lamp. "What's the chief got to do with my Theft?"

HIS uncle examined both ends of the corridor again. "Eric, what's the most important thing we, or you, or anyone, can do? What is our life all about? What are we here for?"

"That's easy," Eric chuckled. "That's the easiest question there is. A child could answer it:

"*Hit back at the Monsters,*" he quoted. "*Drive them from the planet, if we can. Regain Earth for Mankind, if we can. But above all, hit back at the Monsters. Make them suffer as they've made us suffer. Make them know we're still here, we're still fighting. Hit back at the Monsters.*"

"Hit back at the Monsters. Right. Now how have we been doing that?"

Eric the Only stared at his uncle. That wasn't the next question in the catechism. He must have heard incorrectly. His uncle couldn't have made a mistake in such a basic ritual.

"*We will do that,*" he went on in the second reply, his voice sliding into the singsong of childhood lessons, "*by regaining the science and knowhow of our forefathers. Man was once Lord of all Creation: his science and knowhow made him supreme. Science and knowhow is what we need to hit back at the Monsters.*"

"Now, Eric," his uncle asked gently. "Please tell me this. What in hell is knowhow?"

That was way off. They were a full corridor's length from the normal progression of the catechism now.

"Knowhow is — knowhow is —" he stumbled over the un-

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familiar verbal terrain. "Well, it's what our ancestors knew. And what they did with it, I guess. Knowhow is what you need before you can make hydrogen bombs or economic warfare or guided missiles, any of those really big weapons like our ancestors had."

"Did those weapons do them any good? Against the Monsters, I mean. Did they stop the Monsters?"

Eric looked completely blank for a moment, then brightened. Oh! He knew the way now. He knew how to get back to the catechism:

"The suddenness of the attack, the — "

"Stop it!" his uncle ordered. "Don't give me any of that garbage! *The suddenness of the attack, the treachery of the Monsters* — does it sound like an explanation to you? Honestly? If our ancestors were really Lords of Creation and had such great weapons, would the Monsters have been able to conquer them? I've led my band on dozens of raids, and I know the value of a surprise attack; but believe me, boy, it's only good for a flash charge and a quick getaway if you're facing a superior force. You can knock somebody down when he doesn't expect it. But if he really has more than you, he won't *stay* down. Right?"

"I — I guess so. I wouldn't know."

"Well, I know. I know from plenty of battle experience. The thing to remember is that once our ancestors were knocked down, they stayed down. That means their science and knowhow were not so much in the first place. And *that* means —" here he turned his head and looked directly into Eric's eyes — *"that* means the science of our ancestors wasn't worth one good damn against the Monsters, and it wouldn't be worth one good damn to us!"

Eric the Only turned pale. He knew heresy when he heard it.

HIS uncle patted him on the shoulder, drawing a deep breath as if he'd finally spat out something extremely unpleasant. He leaned closer, eyes glittering beneath the forehead glow lamp and his voice dropped to a fierce whisper.

"Eric. When I asked you how we've been hitting back at the Monsters, you told me what we *ought* to do. We haven't been *doing* a single thing to bother them. We don't know how to reconstruct the ancestor-science, we don't have the tools or weapons or knowhow — whatever *that* is — but they wouldn't do us a bit of good even if we had them. Because they failed once. They

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failed completely and at their best. There's just no point in trying to put them together again."

And now Eric understood. He understood why his uncle had whispered, why there had been so much strain in this conversation. Bloodshed was involved here, bloodshed and death.

"Uncle Thomas," he whispered, in a voice that kept cracking despite his efforts to keep it whole and steady, "how long have you been an Alien-Science man? When did you leave Ancestor-Science?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher caressed his spear before he answered. He felt for it with a gentle, wandering arm, almost unconsciously, but both of them registered the fact that it was loose and ready. His tremendous body, nude except for the straps about his loins and the light spear-sling on his back, looked as if it were preparing to move instantaneously in any direction.

He stared again from one end of the burrow to the other, his forehead lamp reaching out to the branching darkness of the exits. Eric stared with him. No one was leaning tightly against a wall and listening.

"How long? Since I got to know your father. He was in another band; naturally we hadn't seen much of each other before he married my sister. I'd heard about him, though: everyone in the Male Society had — he was a great thief. But once he became my brother-in-law, I learned a lot from him. I learned about locks, about the latest traps — and I learned about Alien-Science. He'd been an Alien-Science man for years. He converted your mother, and he converted me."

Eric the Only backed away. "No!" he called out wildly. "Not my father and mother! They were decent people — when they were killed a service was held in their name — they went to add to the science of our ancestors —"

HIS uncle jammed a powerful hand over his mouth.

"Shut up, you damn fool, or you'll finish us both! Of course your parents were decent people. How do you think they were killed? Your mother was with your father out in Monster territory. Have you ever heard of a woman going along with her husband on a Theft? And taking her baby with her? Do you think it was an ordinary robbery of the Monsters? They were Alien-science people, serving their faith as best they could. They died for it."

Eric looked into his uncle's eyes over the hand that covered the lower half of his face. *Alien-science people . . . serving their faith . . . do you think it was an*

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ordinary robbery . . . they died for it!

He had never realized before how odd it was that his parents had gone to Monster territory together, a man taking his wife and the woman taking her baby!

As he relaxed, his uncle removed the gagging hand. "What kind of Theft was it that my parents died in?"

Thomas examined his face and seemed satisfied. "The kind you're going after," he said. "If you are your father's son. If you're man enough to continue the work he started. Are you?"

Eric started to nod, then found himself shrugging weakly, and finally just hung his head. He didn't know what to say. His uncle — well, his uncle was his model and his leader, and he was strong and wise and crafty. His father — naturally, he wanted to emulate his father and continue whatever work he had started. But this was his initiation ceremony, after all, and there would be enough danger merely in proving his manhoood. For his initiation ceremony to take on a task that had destroyed his father, the greatest thief the tribe had ever known, and a heretical, blasphemous task at that . . . .

"I'll try. I don't know if I can."

"You can," his uncle told him heartily. "It's been set up for you. It will be like walking through a dug burrow, Eric. All you have to face through is the council. You'll have to be steady there, no matter what. You tell the chief that you're undertaking the third category."

"But why the third?" Eric asked. "Why does it have to be Monster souvenirs?"

"Because that's what we need. And you stick to it, no matter what pressure they put on you. Remember, an initiate has the right to decide what he's going to steal. A man's first Theft is his own affair."

"But, listen, uncle —"

There was a whistle from the end of the burrow. Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded in the direction of the signal.

"The council's beginning, boy. We'll talk later, on expedition. Now remember this: stealing from the third category is your own idea, and all your own idea. Forget everything else we've talked about. If you hit any trouble with the chief, I'll be there. I'm your sponsor, after all."

He threw an arm about his confused nephew and walked to the end of the burrow where the other members of the band waited.

II

THE tribe had gathered in its central and largest burrow under the great, hanging glow

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lamps that might be used in this place alone. Except for the few sentinels on duty in the outlying corridors, all of Mankind was here. It was an awesome sight to behold.

On the little hillock known as the Royal Mound, lolled Franklin the Father of Many Thieves, Chieftain of all Mankind. He alone of the cluster of warriors displayed heaviness of belly and flabbiness of arm — for he alone had the privilege of a sedentary life. Beside the sternly muscled band leaders who formed his immediate background, he looked almost womanly; and yet one of his many titles was simply The Man.

Yes, unquestionably The Man of Mankind was Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. You could tell it from the hushed, respectful attitudes of the subordinate warriors who stood at a distance from the mound. You could tell it from the rippling interest of the women as they stood on the other side of the great burrow, drawn up in the ranks of the Female Society. You could tell it from the nervousness and scorn with which the women were watched by their leader, Ottilie, the Chieftain's First Wife. And finally, you could tell it from the faces of the children, standing in a distant, disorganized bunch. A clear majority of their faces bore an unmistakable resemblance to Franklin's.

Franklin clapped his hands, three evenly spaced, flesh-heavy wallops.

"In the name of our ancestors," he said, "and the science with which they ruled the Earth, I declare this council opened. May it end as one more step in the regaining of their science. Who asked for a council?"

"I did." Thomas the Trap-Smasher moved out of his band and stood before the chief.

Franklin nodded, and went on with the next, formal question:

"And your reason?"

"As a band leader, I call attention to a candidate for manhood. A member of my band, a spear-carrier for the required time, and an accepted apprentice in the Male Society. My nephew, Eric the Only."

As his name was sung out, Eric shook himself. Half on his own volition and half in response to the pushes he received from the other warriors, he stumbled up to his uncle and faced the chief. This, the most important moment of his life, was proving almost too much for him. So many people in one place, accredited and famous warriors, knowledgeable and attractive women, the chief himself, all this after the shattering revelations from his uncle — he was finding it hard to think

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clearly. And it was vital to think clearly. His responses to the next few questions had to be exactly right.

THE chief was asking the first: "Eric the Only, do you apply for full manhood?"

Eric breathed hard and nodded. "I do."

"As a full man, what will be your value to Mankind?"

"I will steal for Mankind whatever it needs. I will defend Mankind against all outsiders. I will increase the possessions and knowledge of the Female Society so that the Female Society can increase the power and well-being of Mankind."

"And all this you swear to do?"

"And all this I swear to do."

The Chief turned to Eric's uncle. "As his sponsor, do you support his oath and swear that he is to be trusted?"

With just the faintest hint of sarcasm in his voice, Thomas the Trap-Smasher replied: "Yes. I support his oath and swear that he is to be trusted."

There was a rattling moment, the barest second, when the chief's eyes locked with those of the band leader. With all that was on Eric's mind at the moment, he noticed it. Then the chief looked away and pointed to the women on the other side of the burrow.

"He is accepted as a candidate by the men. Now the women must ask for proof, for only a woman's proof bestows full manhood."

The first part was over. And it hadn't been too bad. Eric turned to face the advancing leaders of the Female Society, Ottilie, the Chieftain's First Wife, in the center. Now came the part that scared him. The women's part.

As was customary at such a moment, his uncle and sponsor left him when the women came forward. Thomas the Trap-Smasher led his band to the warriors grouped about the Throne Mound. There, with their colleagues, they folded their arms across their chests and turned to watch. A man can only give proof of his manhood while he is alone; his friends cannot support him once the women approach.

It was not going to be easy, Eric realized. He had hoped that at least one of his uncle's wives would be among the three examiners: they were both kindly people who liked him and had talked to him much about the mysteries of women's work. But he had drawn a trio of hard-faced females who apparently intended to take him over the full course before they passed him.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer opened the proceedings. She

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circled him belligerently, hands on hips, her great breasts rolling to and fro like a pair of swollen pendulums, her eyes glittering with scorn.

"Eric the Only," she intoned, and then paused to grin, as if it were a name impossible to believe, "Eric the Singleton, Eric the one and only child of either his mother *or* his father. Your parents almost didn't have enough between them to make a solitary child. Is there enough in you to make a man?"

THERE was a snigger of appreciation from the children in the distance, and it was echoed by a few growling laughs from the vicinity of the Throne Mound. Eric felt his face and neck go red. He would have fought any man to the death for remarks like these. Any man at all. But who could lift his hand to a woman and be allowed to live? Besides, one of the main purposes of this exhibition was to investigate his powers of self-control.

"I think so," he managed to say after a long pause. "And I'm willing to prove it."

"Prove it, then!" the woman snarled. Her right hand, holding a long, sharp-pointed pin, shot to his chest like a flung spear. Eric made his muscles rigid and tried to send his mind away. That, the men had told him, was what you had to do at this moment: it was not you they were hurting, not you at all. You, your mind, your knowledge of self, were in another part of the burrow entirely, watching these painful things being done to someone else.

The pin sank into his chest for a little distance, paused, came out. It probed here, probed there; finally it found a nerve in his upper arm. There, guided by the knowledge of the Sickness-Healer, it bit and clawed at the delicate area until Eric felt he would grind his teeth to powder in the effort not to cry out. His clenched fists twisted agonizingly at the ends of his arms in a paroxysm of protest, but he kept his body still. He didn't cry out; he didn't move away; he didn't raise a hand to protect himself.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer stepped back and considered him. "There is no man here yet," she said grudgingly. "But perhaps there is the beginnings of one."

He could relax. The physical test was over. There would be another one, much later, after he had completed his theft successfully; but that would be exclusively by men as part of his proud initiation ceremony. Under the circumstances, he knew he would be able to go through it almost gaily.

Meanwhile, the women's physi-

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cal test was over. That was the important thing for now. In sheer reaction, his body gushed forth sweat which slid over the bloody cracks in his skin and stung viciously. He felt the water pouring down his back and forced himself not to go limp, prodded his mind into alertness.

"Did that hurt?" he was being asked by Rita, the old crone of a Record-Keeper. There was a solicitous smile on her forty-year-old face, but he knew it was a fake. A woman as old as that no longer felt sorry for anybody. She had too many aches and pains and things generally wrong with her to worry about other people's troubles.

"A little," he said. "Not much."

"The Monsters will hurt you much more if they catch you stealing from them, do you know that? They will hurt you much more than we ever could."

"I know. But the stealing is more important than the risk I'm taking. The stealing is the most important thing a man can do."

RITA THE Record-Keeper nodded. "Because you steal things Mankind needs in order to live. You steal things that the Female Society can make into food, clothing and weapons for Mankind, so that Mankind can live and flourish."

He saw the way, saw what was expected of him. "No," he contradicted her. "That's not why we steal. We live on what we steal, but we do not steal just to go on living."

"Why?" she asked blandly, as if she didn't know the answer better than any other member of the tribe. "Why do we steal? What is more important than survival?"

Here it was now. The catechism.

"To hit back at the Monsters," he began. *"To drive them from the planet, if we can. Regain Earth for Mankind, if we can. But, above all, hit back at the Monsters . . . ."*

He ploughed through the long verbal ritual, pausing at the end of each part, so that the Record-Keeper could ask the proper question and initiate the next sequence.

She tried to trip him once. She reversed the order of the fifth and sixth questions. Instead of *"What will we do with the Monsters when we have regained the Earth from them?"* she asked, *"Why can't we use the Monsters' own Alien-Science to fight the Monsters?"*

Carried along by mental habit, Eric was well into the passage beginning *"We will keep them as our ancestors kept all strange animals, in a place called a zoo, or we will drive them into our burrows and force them to live*

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as we have lived," before he realized the switch and stopped in confusion. Then he got a grip on himself, sought the right answer in his memory with calmness, as his uncle's wives had schooled him to do, and began again.

"There are three reasons why we cannot ever use Alien-Science," he recited, holding up his hand with the thumb and little finger closed. *"Alien-Science is non-human, Alien-Science is inhuman, Alien-Science is anti-human. First, since it is non-human,"* he closed his forefinger, *"we cannot use it because we can never understand it. And because it is inhuman, we would never want to use it even if we could understand it. And because it is anti-human and can only be used to hurt and damage Mankind, we would not be able to use it so long as we remain human ourselves. Alien-Science is the opposite of Ancestor-Science in every way, ugly instead of beautiful, hurtful instead of helpful. When we die, Alien-Science would not bring us to the world of our ancestors, but to another world full of Monsters."*

ALL in all, it went very well, despite the trap into which he had almost fallen.

But he couldn't help remembering the conversation with his uncle in the other burrow. As his mouth reeled off the familiar words and concepts, his mind kept wondering how the two fitted together. Hs uncle was Alien-Science, and, according to his uncle, so had been his parents. Did that make them non-human, inhuman, anti-human?

And what did it make him? He knew his religious duty well: he should at this moment be telling all Mankind about his uncle's horrible secret.

The whole subject was far too complicated for someone with his limited experience.

When he had completed the lengthy catechism, Rita the Record-Keeper said: "And this is what you say about the science of our ancestors. Now we will find out what the science of our ancestors says about you."

She signaled over her shoulder, without turning her head, and two young girls — female apprentices — pulled forward the large record machine which was the very center of the tribe's religious life. They stepped back, both smiling shyly and encouragingly at Eric the Only.

He knew the smiles meant little more than simple best wishes from apprentices of one sex to apprentices of the other, but even that was quite a bit at the moment. It meant that he was much closer to full status than they. It meant that, in the opinion of un-

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prejudiced, disinterested observers, his examination was proceeding very well indeed.

Singleton, he thought fiercely to himself. *I'll show them what a singleton can do!*

Rita the Record-Keeper turned a knob at the top of the squat machine and it began to hum. She flung her arms up, quiveringly apart, and all, warriors, women, children, apprentices, even the chief himself, all bowed their heads.

"Harken to the words of our ancestors," she chanted. "Watch closely the spectacle of their great achievements. When their end was upon them, and they knew that only we, their descendants, might regain the Earth they had lost, they made this machine for the future generations of Mankind as a guide to the science that once had been and must be again."

The old woman lowered her arms. Simultaneously, heads went up all over the burrow and stared expectantly at the wall opposite the record machine, waiting for the magic message.

"Eric the Only," Rita called, spinning the dial on the left of the machine with one hand and stabbing at it randomly with the forefinger of the other. "This is the sequence in the science of our ancestors that speaks for you alone. This is the appointed vision under which you will live and die."

HE stared at the wall, breathing hard. Now he would find out what his life was to be about —*now!* His uncle's vision at this moment, years ago, had suggested the nickname he came to bear: the Trap-Smasher. At the last initiation ceremony, a youth had called forth a sequence in which two enormous airborne vehicles of the ancestors had collided.

They'd tried to cheer the boy up, but he'd known his fate was upon him. Sure enough, he had been caught by a monster in the middle of his Theft and dashed to pieces against a wall.

Even then, Eric decided, he'd rather have that kind of a sequence than the awful emptiness of a *blank* vision. When, every once in a while, the machine went on and showed nothing but a blinding white rectangle, the whole tribe knew that the youth being examined had no possibility of manhood in him at all. And the machine was never wrong. A boy who'd drawn a blank vision inevitably became more and more effeminate as he grew older without ever going out on his Theft. He tended to shun the company of warriors and to ask the women for minor tasks to perform. The machine of the ancestors looked at a boy and told

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exactly what he was and what he would become.

It had been great, that science which had produced this machine, no doubt about it. There was a power source in it which was self-contained, and which was supposed to be like the power behind all things. It would run almost forever, if the machine were not tampered with — although who could dream of tampering with it? In its visions were locked, not only the secrets of every individual human being, but enormous mysteries which the whole of Mankind had to solve before it could work out its salvation through the rituals and powers of the ancestral science.

Now, however, there was only one small part of Mankind that concerned Eric. Himself. His future. He waited, growing more and more tense as the power hum from the machine increased in pitch. And suddenly there was a grunt of awe from the entire burrow of people as a vision was thrown upon the wall.

He hadn't drawn a blank. That was the most important thing. He had been given an authentic ancestral vision.

"Scattergood's does it again!" a voice blared, as the picture projected on the wall showed people coming from all directions, wearing the strange body wrappings of the ancestors. They rushed, men, women, children, from the four corners of the glittering screen to some strange structure in the center and disappeared into its entrance. More and more poured in, more and more kept materializing at the edges and scrambling toward the structure in the center.

"Scattergood's does it again!" the vision yelled out at them. "The sale of sales! The value of values! Only at Scattergood's three stores tomorrow. Binoculars, tape recorders, cameras, all at tremendous reductions, many below cost. Value, value, value!"

Now the vision showed only objects. Strange, unfamiliar objects such as the ancestors used. And at each object appeared, the voice recited a charm over it. Powerful and ancient magic this, the forgotten lore of Ancestor-Science.

"Krafft-Yahrmann Exposure Meters, the best there is, you've heard about them and now you can buy them, the light meter that's an eye-opener, a price to fit every pocketbook, eight dollars and ninety-five cents, tomorrow at Scattergood's, absolutely only one to a customer.

"Kyoto Automatic Eight-Millimeter Movie Cameras with an f 1.4 lens and an electric eye that does all the focusing and gives you a perfect exposure every single time. As low as three dol-

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lars a week. The supply is limited, so hurry, hurry, hurry!"

ERIC watched the sequence unfold, his hands squeezing each other, his eyes almost distended in reverence and concentration. This was the clue to his life, to what he might become. This was the sequence that the record machine of the ancestors, turned on at random, had vouchsafed as a prophecy of his future.

All knowledge was in that machine — and no possibility of error.

But Eric was getting worried. The vision was so strange. Sometimes there would be a vision that baffled even the wisest women. And that meant the youth who had called it forth would always be a puzzle, to himself and all of Mankind.

Let it not happen to him! O ancestors, O science, O record machine, let it not happen to him!

Let him only have a clear and definite vision so that his personality could be clear and definite for the rest of his life!

"Our special imported high-power precision binoculars," the voice roared on as a man appeared in the vision and brought one of the strange objects up to his eyes. "If we told you the manufacturer's name, you'd recognize it immediately. 7 x 50, only fourteen dollars and ninety-five cents, *with case*. 10 x 50, only fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents, *with case*. You see further, you see clearer, you pay less. You always pay less at Scattergood's. Rock-bottom prices! Skyscraper values! Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, at Scattergood's annual week-after-Hallowe'en Sale!"

There was a click as the vision went off abruptly to be replaced by a white rectangle on the wall of the burrow. Eric realized that this was all the clue there was to be to his life. What did it mean? Could it be interpreted?

Anxiously, now, he turned to Ottilie, the Chieftain's First Wife. He turned to her as everyone else in Mankind was now turning, Sarah the Sickness-Healer and Rita the Record-Keeper amongst them.

Only Ottilie could read a vision, only short, squat, imperious Ottilie. The Chieftain's First Wife was her title of honor and her latest title, but long before she had acquired that, long before even she had become Head of the Female Society, she had been Ottilie the Augur, Ottilie the Omen-Teller, Ottilie who could walk in her mind from the homey burrow of the present into the dark, labyrinthine corridors of the future, Ottilie who could read signs, Ottilie who could announce portents.

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IT WAS as Ottilie the Augur that she could pick out the one new-born babe in a litter of three that had to be destroyed because, in some way or other, it would one day bring death to its people. It was as Ottilie the Augur that, upon the death of the old chief, she had chosen Franklin the Father of Many Thieves to take over the leadership of Mankind since he stimulated the most propitious omens. In everything she had been right. And now, once again it was as Ottilie the Augur that she threw her arms over her head and twisted and swayed and moaned as she sought deep inside herself for the meaning of Eric's vision, it was as Ottilie the Augur and not as Ottilie the Chieftain's First Wife, for that she had been only since Franklin had ascended the Throne Mound.

The scratches and holes gouged in his body by Sarah the Sickness-Healer had begun to ache badly, but Eric shrugged off their annoyance. Could his vision be interpreted? And *how* would it be interpreted?

Whatever Ottilie saw in the vision would stick to him for the rest of his life, much closer than the dried blood upon his arms and legs and chest. How could you possibly interpret such a vision? Eric the Scattergood? That was meaningless. Eric the Value? No, that was a little better, but it was dreadfully vague, almost as bad as a blank vision.

He stared past Ottilie's writhing figure to where his uncle stood, surrounded by his band, a little to the left of the Throne Mound. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was watching Ottilie and grinning with all his teeth.

What did he find so funny, Eric wondered desperately? Was there nothing holy to him? Didn't he realize how important it was to Eric's future that his vision be readable, that he get a name to be proud of? What was funny in Ottilie's agony as she gave birth to Eric's future?

He realized that Ottilie was beginning to make coherent sounds. He strained his ears to listen. This, this was it. Who he really was. Who he would be, for all his life.

"Three times," Ottilie mumbled in a voice that steadily grew clearer and louder, "three times our ancestors gave Eric his name. Three repetitions they made. Three different ways they called on him to become what their science needed him to be. And all of you heard it, and I heard it, and Eric heard it too."

Which, Eric puzzled, which among the many strange magical statements had contained his name and his life's-work? He waited for the Augur to come out

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with it. He had almost given up breathing.

Her body relaxed now, her hands hanging at her sides, Ottilie was speaking to them in a sharp, authoritative voice as she stared at the wall of the burrow where the vision had appeared.

"'A light meter that's an eye-opener,' the ancestor-science said," she reminded them. "And 'an electric eye that does all the focusing.' And 'you see further, you see clearer, you pay less,' the Record-Machine told us of Eric. What the ancestors want of Eric is unmistakable, what he must be if we are to hit back at the Monsters and regain the Earth which is rightfully ours."

THANK the record machine, thank each and every ancestor! At least the message had been unmistakable. But what precisely had it been?

Ottilie the Augur, the Omen-Teller, turned to face him now where he stood apart from the rest of eagerly-watching Mankind. He straightened up and stood stiffly to learn his fate.

"Eric," she said. "Eric the Only, Eric the Singleton, you go out now to make your Theft. If you are successful and return alive, you will become a man. And as a man you will no longer be Eric the Only, you will be Eric the Eye. Eric the Eye, Eric the Espier, Eric who seeks out the path for Mankind. Eric who hits back at the Monsters with his eye, his open eye, his electric eye, his further-seeing, clearer-seeing, less-paying eye. For this is the word of the ancestors, and all of you have heard it."

At last Eric could take a deep breath, and he did so now, noisily, in common with the whole of Mankind who had been hanging on Ottilie's words. Eric the Eye — that was what he was to be. If he was successful . . . and if he lived.

Eric the Eye. Eric the Espier. Now he knew about himself. It was fixed, and for all time. It was a good name to bear, a fine personality to have. He had been very fortunate.

Rita the Record-Keeper and her daughter, Harriet the History-Teller, rolled the record machine back into its accustomed holy place, the niche in the wall behind the Throne Mound. Despite the sacred quality of the act in which she was engaged, the younger woman could not take her eyes off Eric. He was a person of consequence now, or at least would be when he returned. Other young and mating-aged women, he noticed, were looking at him the same way.

He began to walk around in a little circle before Mankind, and, as he walked, he strutted. He

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waited until Ottilie, no longer the Augur now, no longer the Omen-Teller, but once more the Chieftain's First Wife — he waited until she had returned to her place at the head of the Female Society, before he began to sing.

He threw back his head and spread out his arms and danced proudly, stampingly, before Mankind. He spun around in great dizzying circles and leaped in the air and came down with wrenching spasmodic twists of his legs and arms. And as he danced, he sang.

He sang out of the pride that racked his chest like a soul coughing, out of the majesty of the warrior-that-was-to-be, out of his sure knowledge of self. And he sang his promise to his fellows:

I am Eric the Eye,

Eric the Open Eye,

Eric the Electric Eye,

Eric the Further - Seeing, Clearer-Seeing, Less-Paying Eye.

Eric the Espier —

Eric who finds and points out the way.

Are you lost in a strange place?

I will show you the path to your home.

Does the burrow break off in too many branches?

I will pick out the best one and Mankind shall walk through in safety.

Are there enemies about, hidden traps, unthought-of dangers?

I will see them and give warning of them in time.

I will walk at the head of the line of warriors and see for them,

And they shall be confident and they shall conquer —

For they have Eric the Espier to lead the way and point the path!

SO he sang as he danced before Mankind, under the enormous glow lamps of its great central burrow. He sang of his mission in life as just a few short auld lang synes ago he had heard Roy the Runner, at his initiation, sing of the fleetness and swiftness that he would soon be the master of; as his Uncle Thomas had sung long before that of his coming ability to detect and dismantle traps; as once his own father had sung of the robberies he was to commit, of the storerooms he would empty for the benefit of Mankind. He sang and he leaped and he whirled, and all the while the watching host of Mankind beat time with its feet and hands and played chorus in the litany of his triumph.

Then came a loud grunt from Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. The noise stopped. Eric danced to a quivering halt, his body wet all over, his limbs still trembling.

"That is what is to be," Franklin pointed out, "once the Theft

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has been made. But first, first comes the Theft. Always before manhood comes the Theft. Now let us speak of your Theft."

"I will go into the very home of the Monsters," Eric announced proudly, his head thrown back before the chief. "I will go into their home alone, with no companion but my own weapons, as a warrior should. I will steal from them, no matter what the danger, no matter what the threat. And what I steal, I will bring back for the use and enjoyment of Mankind."

Franklin nodded and made the formal reply. "That is good, and it is spoken like a warrior. What do you promise to steal from the Monsters? For your first Theft must be a promise made in advance and kept, kept exactly."

Now they were at it. Eric glanced at his uncle for support. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was staring off in a different direction. Eric licked his lips. Well, maybe it wouldn't be too bad. After all, a youth going off on his first Theft had complete freedom of choice.

"I promise to make my theft in the third category," he said, his voice trembling just a little.

The results were much more than he had anticipated. Franklin the Father of Many Thieves yelped sharply. He leaped off the Royal Mound and stood gaping at Eric for a while. His great belly and fat arms quivered with disbelief.

"The third category, did you say? The *third*?"

Eric, thoroughly frightened now, nodded.

Franklin turned to Chief Wife Ottilie. They both peered through the ranks of Mankind to where Thomas the Trap-Smasher stood in the midst of his band, seemingly unconcerned by the sensation that had just been created.

"What *is* this, Thomas?" the chief demanded, all ceremony and formality gone from his speech. "What are you trying to pull? What's this third category stuff you're up to?"

Thomas the Trap - Smasher turned a bland eye upon him. "What am *I* up to? I'm not up to a damn thing. The boy's got a right to pick his category. If he wants to steal in the third category, well, that's his business. What have I got to do with it?"

The chief stared at him for a few moments longer. Then he swung back to Eric and said shortly: "All right. You've chosen. The third category it is. Now let's get on with the feast."

SOMEHOW it was all spoiled for Eric. The initiation feast that preceded a first Theft — how he had looked forward to it! But he was apparently involved in

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something going on in Mankind, something dangerous and unsavory.

The chief obviously considered him an important factor in whatever difficulty had arisen. Usually, an initiate about to depart on a Theft was the focus of all conversation as Mankind ate in its central burrow, the women squatting on one side, the men on the other, the children at the far ends where light was dim. But at this meal, the chief made only the most necessary ritual remarks to Eric. His eyes kept wandering from him to Thomas the Trap-Smasher.

Once in a while, Franklin's eyes met those of Ottilie, his favored and first wife, across the feast that had been spread the length of the burrow. He seemed to be saying something to her, although neither of them moved their lips. Then they would nod at each other and look back to Eric's uncle.

The rest of Mankind became aware of the strained atmosphere: there was little of the usual laughter and gaiety of an initiation feast. The Trap-Smasher's band had pulled in tightly all around him; most of them were not even bothering to eat but sat watchful and alert. Other band captains — men like Stephen the Strong-Armed and Harold the Hurler — had worried looks on their faces as if they were calculating highly complex problems.

Even the children were remarkably quiet. They served the food over which the women had said charms much earlier, then scurried to their places and ate with wide eyes aimed at their elders.

All in all, Eric was distinctly relieved when Franklin the Father of Many Thieves belched commandingly, stretched, and lay back on the floor of the burrow. In a few minutes, he was asleep, snoring loudly.

Night had officially begun.

IV

AT the end of the sleep period, as soon as the chief had awakened and yawned, thus proclaiming the dawn, Thomas the Trap-Smasher's band started on its trip.

Eric, still officially surnamed the Only, carried the precious loin straps of manhood in the food knapsack the women had provided for a possible journey of several days. They should return before the next sleep period, but when one went on an expedition into Monster territory anything might happen.

They stepped out in full military formation, a long, straggling single file, each man barely in

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sight of the warrior immediately ahead. For the first time in his military career, Eric was wearing only one set of spears — those for himself. Extra weapons for the band — as well as extra supplies — were on the back of a new apprentice, a stripling who marched a distance behind Eric, watching him with the same mixture of fright and exhilaration Eric himself had once accorded all other warriors.

Ahead of Eric, momentarily disappearing as the dim corridor curved and branched, was Roy the Runner, his long, loose-jointed legs purposefully treading down the mileage. And all the way in the lead of the column, Eric knew, was his uncle. Thomas the Trap-Smasher would be striding cautiously yet without any unnecessary waste of time, the large glow lamp on his forehead constantly shifting from wall to wall of the uninhabited burrow and then straight ahead, the heavy spear in each brawny hand ready for instant action, his mouth set to call the warning behind him if danger materialized.

To be a man — this was what it was like! To go on expeditions like this for the rest of one's life, glorious, adventure-charged expeditions so that Mankind might eat well and have weapons and live as Mankind should. And when you returned, triumphant, victorious, the welcoming dance of the women as they threaded their way through the tired ranks, giving you refreshment and taking from you the supplies that only they could turn into usable articles. Then, after you had eaten and drunk and rested, your own dance, the dance of the men, where you sang and acted out for the tribe all the events of this particular expedition, the dangers you had overcome, the splendid courage you had shown, the strange and mysterious sights you had seen.

The sights you had seen! As Eric the Eye, he would probably be entitled to a solo dance any time his band came across anything particularly curious. Oh, how high Eric the Eye would leap, how loudly, how proudly, how melodiously, he would sing of the wonders the expedition had encountered!

"Eric the Eye," the women would murmur. "What a fine, fine figure of a man! What a mate for some lucky woman!"

HARRIET the History-Teller this morning, for example, before they started out. She had filled his canteen for him with fresh water as if he were already an accredited man instead of an initiate going out to face his ultimate trial. Before the eyes of all Mankind she had filled it and

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brought it to him, her eyes downcast and light purple blushes on the rosy skin of her face and body. She had treated him the way a wife treats a husband, and many warriors — Eric thought gleefully — many full warriors with their Thefts long behind them had observed that Eric was likely to join the ranks of the Male Society and the married men almost simultaneously.

Of course, with her unlucky red hair, her bustling, domineering mother, Harriet was not exactly the most marriageable girl in Mankind. Still, there were many full warriors who had not yet been able to persuade a woman to mate with them, who watched Franklin and his three wives with unconcealed hunger and envy. How they would envy Eric, the newest warror of all, when he mated the same night he returned from his theft! Call him Only, then! Call him singleton, then!

They would have litter after litter, he and Harriet, large litters, ample litters, four, five, even six at a time. People would forget he'd ever been the product of a singleton birth. Other women, mates of other warriors, would wriggle to attract his attention as they now wriggled when they caught the eye of Franklin the Father of Many Thieves. He would make the litters fathered by Franklin look puny in comparison, he would prove that the best hope for Mankind's increase lay in his loins and his loins alone. And when the time came to select another chief . . .

"Hey, you damned day-dreaming singleton!" Roy the Runner was calling from the burrow ahead. "Will you wipe that haze out of your face and pay attention to signals? This is an expedition to Monster territory, not a stroll in the women's quarters. Stay alert, will you? The band captain's sent down a call for you."

Amid the chuckles ahead and behind him — damn it, even the new apprentice was laughing! — Eric took a firmer grip on his glow torch and sprinted for the head of the column. As he passed each man, he was asked the name of the girl he'd been thinking about and pressed for interesting details. Since he kept his mouth tightly shut, some of the warriors hypothesized out loud. They were painfully close to the truth.

His uncle wasn't much gentler with him. "Eric the *Eye*!" the Trap-Smasher growled. "Eric the Eyebrow, Eric the Closed Eyelash, you'll be known as, if you don't wake up! Now stay abreast of me and try to *act* like Eric the Eye. These are dangerous burrows and my vision isn't as sharp as yours. Besides, I have to fill

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you in on a couple of things." He turned. "Spread out a little farther back there," he called out to the men behind him. "Spread out! You should be a full spear-cast from the backside of the man in front of you. Let me see a real strung-out column with plenty of distance between each warrior."

TO Eric, he muttered, once the maneuver had been completed: "Good. Gives us a chance to talk without everyone in the band hearing us. You can trust my bunch, but still, why take chances?"

Eric nodded, with no idea what he was talking about. His uncle had become slightly odd recently. Well, he was still the best band captain in all Mankind.

They marched along together, the light from the strange glowing substance on Eric's torch and his uncle's forehead spreading a yellowish illumination some hundred feet ahead of them. On either side, underfoot, overhead, were the curved, featureless walls of the burrow. From the center of the corridor, where they marched, the walls looked soft and spongy, but Eric knew what tremendous labor was involved in digging a niche or recess in them. It took several strong men at least two sleep periods to make a niche large enough to hold a handful of Mankind's store of artifacts.

Where had the burrows come from? Some said they had been dug by the ancestors when they had first begun to hit back at the Monsters. Others claimed the burrows had always been there, waiting for Mankind to find them and be comfortable in them.

In all directions the burrows stretched. On and on they went, interminably curving and branching and forking, dark and silent, until human beings stamped into them with glow lamp and glow torch. These particular corridors, Eric knew, led to Monster territory. He had been along them many times as a humble spear carrier when his uncle's band had been dispatched to bring back the necessities of life for Mankind. Other corridors went off to more exotic and even more dangerous places. But were there any places which had no burrows?

What a thought! Even the Monsters lived in burrows, big as they were reputed to be. But there was a legend that Mankind had once lived outside burrows, outside the branching corridors. Then what had they lived in? Just trying to work it out made you dizzy.

They came to a place where the burrow became two burrows, each curving away from the other in opposite directions.

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"Which one?" his uncle demanded.

Eric unhesitatingly pointed the right.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded. "You have a good memory," he said as he bore in the direction that Eric had indicated. "That's half of being an Eye. The other half is having a feeling, a knack, for the right way to go. You have that too. I've noticed it on every expedition where you've been along. That's what I told those women — Rita, Ottilie — I told them what your name had to be. Eric the Eye, I told them. Find a vision for the kind that corresponds to it."

HE was so shocked that he almost came to a halt. "You picked my name? You told them what kind of vision . . . That's — that's — I never heard of such a thing!"

His uncle laughed. "It's no different from Ottilie the Omen-Teller making a deal with Franklin to have a vision showing him as the new chief. He gets to be chief, she becomes the Chieftain's First Wife and automatically takes over the Female Society. Religion and politics, they're always mixed up together these days, Eric. We're not living in the old times any more when Ancestor-science was real and holy and it worked."

"It still works, Ancestor-science, doesn't it?" he pleaded. "Some of the tme?"

"Everything works *some* of the time. Only Alien-science, though, works *all* of the time. It's working for Aliens, for the Monsters. It's got to begin working for us. That's where you come in."

He had to remember that his uncle was an experienced captain, a knowledgeable warrior. Thomas the Trap-Smasher's protection and advice had brought him, a despised singleton, an orphaned child of parents that no one dared even talk about, to his present estate of almost full thieving status. It was very fortunate for him that neither of his uncle's wives had yet produced a son which survived into the initiate years. He still had a lot to learn from this man.

"Now," the Trap-Smasher was saying, his eyes still on the dimly illuminated corridors ahead. "When we get to the Monster burrows, you go in. You go in alone, of course."

Well, of course, Eric thought. What other way was there to make your Theft? The first time you stole for Mankind, you did it all alone, to prove your manhood, your courage, also the amount of personal luck you enjoyed. It was not like a regular band theft — or organized stealing of a large amount of goods

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that would last Mankind many sleep-periods, almost a tenth of an auld lang syne. In a regular band theft, assigned to each band in rotation, a warrior had to be assured of the luck and skill of the warriors at his side. He had to know that each one of them had made his Theft—and proved himself when completely alone.

Stealing from the Monsters was dangerous enough under the best of conditions. You wanted only the cleverest, bravest, most fortunate warriors along with you.

"Once you're inside, stay close to the wall. Don't look up at first or you're likely to freeze right where you are. Keep your eyes on the wall and move close to it. Move fast."

Nothing new here. Every initiate learned over and over again, before he made his Theft, that it was terribly dangerous to look up when you first entered Monster territory. You had to keep your eyes on the wall and move in the protection of it, the wall touching your shoulder as you ran alongside it. Why this was so, Eric had no idea, but that it was so he had long ago learned to repeat as a fact.

"All right," Thomas the Trap-Smasher went on. "You turn right as you go in. *Right*, do you hear me, Eric? You turn right, without looking up, and run along the wall, letting it brush your shoulder every couple of steps. You run forty, fifty paces, and you come to a great big thing, a structure, that's almost touching the wall. You turn left along that, moving away from the wall, but still not looking up, until you pass an entrance in the structure. You don't go in that first entrance, Eric; you pass it by. About twenty, twenty-five paces further on, there'll be a second entrance, a bigger one. You go in that one."

"I go in that one," Eric repeated carefully, memorizing his uncle's words. He was receiving directions for his Theft, the most important act of his life! Every single thing his uncle told him must be listened to carefully, must not be forgotten.

"You'll be in something that looks like a burrow again, but it'll be darker, at first. The walls will soak up light from your glow lamp. After a while, the burrow will open out into a great big space, a real big and real dark space. You go on in a straight line, looking over your shoulder at the light from the entrance and making sure it's always directly behind you. You'll hit another burrow, a low one this time. Turn right at the first fork as soon as you go in, and there you are."

"Where? Where will I be?

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What happens then?" Eric demanded eagerly. "How do I make my Theft? Where do I find the third category?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher seemed to have trouble continuing. Incredible — he was actually nervous! "There'll be a Stranger there. You tell him who you are, your name. He'll do the rest."

THIS time Eric came to a full stop. "A Stranger?" he asked in complete amazement. "Someone who's not of Mankind?"

His uncle grabbed at his arm and pulled him along. "Well, you've seen Strangers before," he said with a weak laugh. "You know there are others in the burrows besides Mankind. You know that, don't you, boy?"

Eric certainly did.

From an early age he had accompanied his uncle and his uncle's band on warfare and trading expeditions to the burrows a bit further back. He knew that the people in these burrows looked down on the people in his, that they were more plentiful than his people, and led richer, safer lives — but he still couldn't help feeling sorry for them.

They were nothing but Strangers, after all. He was a member of Mankind.

It wasn't just that Mankind lived in the front burrows, those closest to the Monster larder. This enormous convenience might be counterbalanced, he would readily admit, by the dangers associated with it— although the constant exposure to dangers and death in every form were part of Mankind's greatness. They were great despite their inferior technology. So what if they were primarily a source of raw materials to the more populous but less hardy burrows in the rear? How long would the weaponsmiths, the potters and tanners and artificers of these burrows be able to go on with their buzzing, noisy industries once Mankind ceased to bring them the basic substances — food, cloth, metal — it had so gloriously stolen from fear-filled Monster territory? No, Mankind was the bravest, greatest, most important people in all the burrows.

But that still wasn't the point. of it all.

The point was that you had nothing more to do with Strangers than was absolutely necessary. They were Strangers. You were Mankind. You stayed proudly aloof from them at all times.

Trading with them — well, you traded with them. Mankind needed spear-points and sturdy spear-shifts, knapsacks and loin-straps, canteens and cooking vessels. You needed these articles

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and got them in exchange for heavy backloads of shapeless, unprocessed stuff freshly stolen. Mating with them — well, of course you mated with them. One was always on the lookout for extra women who could add to the knowledge and technical abilities of Mankind. But these women became a well-adjusted part of Mankind once they were stolen, just as Mankind's women were complete outsiders and Strangers the moment they had been carried off by a foreign raiding party. And fighting with them, warring with them — next to stealing from the Monsters, that was the sweetest, most exciting part of a warrior's existence.

You traded with Strangers, coldly, suspiciously, always alert for a better bargain; you stole Stranger women whenever you could, gleefully, proudly, because that diminished them and increased the numbers and well-being of Mankind; and you fought Stranger men whenever there was more to be gained that way than by simple trading — and periodically they came upon you as you lay in your burrow unawares and fought you.

But otherwise, for all normal social purposes, they were taboo. Almost as taboo and not-to-be-related-to as the Monsters on the other side of Mankind's burrows. When you came upon an individual Stranger wandering apart from his people, you killed him quickly and casually.

You certainly didn't ask him for advice on your Theft.

ERIC was still brooding on the unprecedented nature of his uncle's instructions when they came to the end of their journey, a large, blind-alley burrow. There was a line cut deep into the blank wall here, a line that started at the floor, went up almost to the height of a man's head, and then curved down to the floor again.

The door to Monster territory.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher waited for a moment, listening. When his experienced ears had detected no unusual noises in the neighborhood, no hint of danger on the other side, he cupped his hands around his mouth, faced back the way he had come, and softly gave the ululating recognition-call of the band. The four other warriors and the apprentice came up swiftly and grouped themselves about him. Then, at a signal from their leader, all squatted near the door.

They ate first, rapidly and silently, removing from their knapsacks handfuls of food that the women had prepared for them and stuffing their mouths full, the beams from the glow lamps above their eyes darting incessantly back and forth along the

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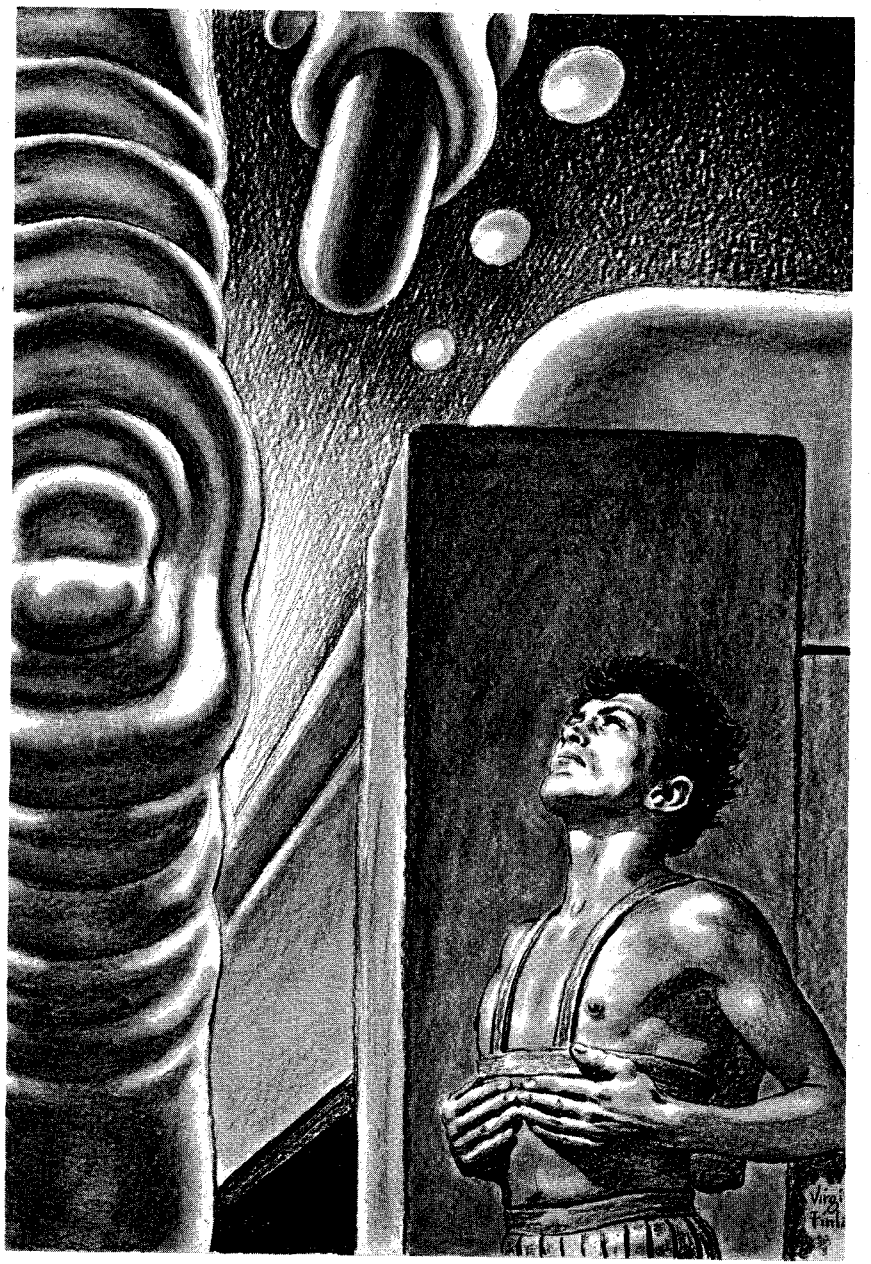

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arched, empty corridor. This was the place of ultimate, awful danger. This was the place where anything might happen.

Eric ate most sparingly of all as was correct for an initiate about to emerge upon his Theft. He knew he had to keep his springiness of body and watchfulness of mind at their highest possible pitch. He saw his uncle nodding approvingly as he returned the bulk of his food to the knapsack.

The floor vibrated slightly underfoot; there was a regular, rhythmic gurgling. Eric knew that meant they were directly over a length of Monster plumbing: upon his return, before the band started homewards, Thomas the Trap-Smasher would make an opening in the plumbing and they would refill their canteens. The water here, nearest to Monster territory, was always the sweetest and best.

Now his uncle got to his feet and called Roy the Runner to him. While the other warriors watched, tense and still, the two men walked to the curved line and laid their ears against it. Satisfied, finally, they inserted spear points into the door's outline on either side and carefully pried the slab back toward them. They laid it on the floor of the corridor, very gently.

A shimmering blur of pure whiteness appeared where the door had been.

Monster territory. The strange, alien light of Monster territory. Eric had seen many warriors disappear into it to fulfill their manhood tasks. Now it was his turn.

Holding his heavy spear at the ready, Eric's uncle leaned forward into the whiteness. His body twisted as he looked up, down, around, on both sides. He withdrew and came back into the burrow.

"No new traps," he said in a soft voice. "The one I dismantled last expedition is still up there on the wall. It hasn't been repaired. Now Eric. Here you go, boy."

Eric rose and walked with him to the doorway, remembering to keep his eyes on the floor. You can't look up, he had been told again and again, not right away, not the first time you're in Monster territory. If you do, you freeze, you're lost, you're done for completely.

His uncle checked him carefully and fondly, making certain that his new loin straps were tight, that his knapsack and back-sling were both in the right position on his shoulders. He took a heavy spear from Eric's right hand and replaced it with a light one from the back-sling. "If you're seen by a Monster," he whispered, "the heavy spear's not

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worth a damn. You scuttle into the closest hiding-place and throw the light spear as far as you can. The Monster can't distinguish between you and the spear. It will follow the spear."

Eric nodded mechanically, although this too he had been told many times, this too was a lesson he knew by heart. His mouth was so dry! He wished that it weren't unmanly to beg for water at such a moment.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher took his torch from him and slipped a glow lamp about his forehead. Then he pushed him through the doorway. "Go make your Theft, Eric," he whispered. "Come back a man."

V

HE was on the other side. He was in Monster territory. He was surrounded by the strange Monster light, the incredible Monster world. The burrows, Mankind, everything familiar, lay behind him.

Panic rose from his stomach and into his throat like vomit.

Don't look up. Eyes down, eyes down or you're likely to freeze right where you are. Stay close to the wall, keep your eyes on the wall and move along it. Turn right and move along the wall. Move fast.

Eric turned. He felt the wall brush his right shoulder. He began to run, keeping his eyes down, touching the wall with his shoulder at regular intervals. He ran as fast as he possibly could, urging his muscles fiercely on. As he ran, he counted the steps to himself.

Twenty paces. Where did the light come from? It was everywhere; it glowed so; it was white, white. *Twenty-five paces. Touch the wall with your shoulder. Don't — above everything — don't wander away from the wall. Thirty paces.* In light like this you had no need of the glow lamp. It was almost too bright to see in. *Thirty-five paces.* The floor was not like a burrow floor. It was flat and very hard. So was the wall. Flat and hard and straight. *Forty paces. Run and keep your eyes down. Run. Keep touching the wall with your shoulder. Move fast. But keep your eyes down. Don't look up. Forty-five paces.*

He almost smashed into the structure he had been told about, but his reflexes and the warnings he had received swung him to the left and along it just in time. It was a different color than the wall, he noted, and a different-textured material. *Keep your eyes down. Don't look up.* He came to an entrance, like the beginning of a small burrow.

Don't go in that first entrance,

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Eric; you pass it by. He began to count again as he ran. Twenty-three paces more, and there was another entrance, a much higher, wider one. He darted inside. *It'll be darker, at first. The walls will soak up light from your glow lamp.*

Eric paused, gasping. He was grateful for the sucking darkness. After that terrible, alien white light, the gloom was friendly, reminiscent of the familiar burrows now so horribly far away.

He could afford to take a breath at this point, he knew. The first, the worst part was over. He wasn't out in the open any more.

He had emerged into Monster territory. He had run fast, following instructions until he was safely under cover again. He was still alive.

The worst was over. Nothing else would be as bad as this.

Monster territory. It lay behind him, bathed in its own peculiar light. Now. Why not? Now, when he was in a place of comparative safety. He could take a chance. He *wanted* to take a chance.

He turned, gingerly, fearfully. He raised his eyes. He looked.

THE cry that tore from his lips was completely involuntary and frightened him almost as much as what he saw. He shut his eyes and threw himself down and sideways. He lay where he had fallen for a long while, almost paralyzed.

It couldn't be. He hadn't seen it. Nothing was that high, nothing ran on and on for such incredible distances!

After a time, he opened his eyes again, keeping them carefully focused on the dark near him. The gloom in this covered place had diminished somewhat as his eyes had grown more accustomed to it. Yellowish light from his glow lamp was providing illumination now: he could make out the walls, about as far apart from each other as those in a burrow, but — unlike a burrow's walls — oddly straight and at right angles to the floor and ceiling. Far off there was an immense patch of darkness. *The burrow will open out into a great big space, a real big and real dark space.*

What was this place, he wondered? What was it to the Monsters?

He had to take another look behind, into the open. One more quick look. He was going to be Eric the Eye. An Eye should be able to look at anything. He had to take another look.

But guardedly, guardedly.

Eric turned again, opening his eyes a little at a time. He clamped his teeth together so as not to cry out. Even so, he almost did. He

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shut his eyes quickly, waited, then opened them again.

Bit by bit, effort by effort, he found he was able to look into the great open whiteness without losing control of himself. It was upsetting, overpowering, but if he didn't look too long at any one time, he could stand it.

Distance. Enormous, elongated, unbelievable distance. Space upon space upon space — that white light bathing it all. Space far ahead, space on all sides, space going on and on until it seemed to have no end to it at all. But there, fantastically far off, there was an end. There was a wall, a wall made by giants that finally sealed off the tremendous space. It rose hugely from the flat, huge floor and disappeared somewhere far overhead.

And in between — once you could stand to look at it this much — in between, there were objects. Enormous objects, dwarfed only by the greatness of the space which surrounded them, enormous, terribly alien objects. Objects like nothing you had ever imagined.

NO, that wasn't quite true. That thing over there. Eric recognized it.

A great, squat thing like a full knapsack without the straps. Since early boyhood, many was the time he had heard it described by warriors back from an expedition into Monster territory.

There was food in that sack and the others like it. Enough food in that one sack to feed the entire population of Mankind for unnumbered auld lang synes. A different kind of food in each sack.

No spear point possessed by Mankind would cut through the fabric of its container, not near the bottom where it was thickest. Warriors had to climb about halfway up the sack, Eric knew, before they could find a place thin enough to carve themselves an entrance. Then the lumps of food would be lowered from man to man all the way down the sack, warriors clinging to precarious handholds every few paces.

Once the pile on the floor was great enough, they would clamber down and fill their specially large, food-expedition knapsacks. Then back to the burrows and to the women who alone possessed the lore of determining whether the food was fit for consumption and of preparing it if it were.

That's where he would be at this moment, on that sack, cutting a hole in it, if he'd chosen a first category Theft like most other youths. He'd be cutting a hole, scooping out a handful of food — any quantity, no matter how small, was acceptable on an initiatory Theft — and be pre-

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paring to go home to plaudits from the women and acceptance from the men. He'd be engaged in a normal, socially-acceptable endeavor.

Instead of which . . .

He found that he was able to stare at the Monster room now from under the cover of his hiding place with only a slight feeling of nausea. Well, that in itself was an achievement. After only a short time, here he was, able to look around and estimate the nature of Monster goods like the most experienced warrior. He couldn't look up too high as yet, but what warrior could?

Well and good, but this wasn't getting him anywhere. He didn't have a normal Theft to make. His was third category. Monster souvenirs.

Eric turned and faced the darkness again. He walked rapidly forward into the straight-walled burrow, the glow-lamp on his forehead lighting a yellow path. Ahead of him, the great black space grew steadily larger as he pushed towards it.

Everything about his Theft, his initiation into manhood, was extraordinary. Thomas the Trap-Smasher telling the women about his special talents, so that he would be accorded a vision and a name which would fit with them. Visions were supposed to come from the ancestors, through the ancestor-science of the record machine. Nobody was supposed to have the slightest idea in advance of what the vision would be. That was all up to the ancestors and their mysterious plans for their descendants.

WAS it possible, was it conceivable, that all visions and names were pre-arranged, that the record machine was set in advance for every initiation? Where did that leave religion? If that were so, how could you continue to believe in logic, in cause and effect?

And having someone — a Stranger, at that! — help you make your Theft. A Theft was supposed to be purely and simply a test of your male potential; by definition, it was something you did alone.

But if you could accept the concept of pre-arranged visions, why not pre-arranged Thefts?

Eric shook his head. He was getting into very dark corridors mentally: his world was turning into sheer confusion.

But one thing he knew. Making an arrangement with a Stranger, as his uncle had done, was definitely an act contrary to all the laws and practices of Mankind. Thomas's uncertain speech had underlined that fact. It was — well, it was *wrong*.

Yet his uncle was the greatest

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man in all Mankind, so far as Eric was concerned. Thomas the Trap-Smasher could do no wrong. But Thomas the Trap-Smasher was evidently leaning toward Alien-science. Alien-science was wrong. But again, on the other hand, his parents, according to the Trap-Smasher, his father and his mother had been Alien-sci-encers.

Too much. There was just too much to work out. There was too much he didn't know. He'd better concentrate on his Theft.

The strange burrow had come to an end. The hairs rose on the back of his neck as he walked into the great dark area and sensed enormous black heights above him. He began to hurry, turning every once in a while to make certain that he was staying in a straight line with the light from the entrance. Here, his fore-head glow lamp was almost no use at all. He didn't like this place. It felt almost like being out in the open.

What, he wondered again fev-erishly, was this structure in the world of the Monsters? What function did it have? He was not sure he wanted to know.

Eric was running by the time he came to the end of the open space. He hit the wall so hard that he was knocked over back-wards.

For a moment, he was badly frightened, then he realized what had happened. He hadn't taken his bearings for a while: he must have moved off at an angle.

Groping along the wall with ex-tended arms, he found the en-trance to the low burrow at last. It was quite low — he had to bend his knees and duck his head as he went up to. It was an un-pleasantly narrow little corridor. But then there was an opening on his right — the fork his uncle had told him about — and he turned into it with relief.

He had arrived.

There was a burst of light from a group of glow lamps. And there were Strangers, there were *sev-eral* Strangers here. Three of them — no, four — no, five! They squatted in a corner of this large, square burrow, three of them talking earnestly, the other two engaged in some incompre-hensible task with materials that were mostly unfamiliar.

ALL OF them leaped to their feet as he trotted in and deployed instantly in a wide semi-circle facing him. Eric wished desperately he had been holding two heavy spears instead of the single light one. With two heavy spears you had both a shield and a dangerous offensive weapon. A light spear was good for a single cast, and that was that.

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He held it nevertheless in the throwing position above his shoulder and glared fiercely, as a warrior of Mankind should. If he had to throw, he decided, he would spring to one side immediately afterward and try to pluck the two heavy spears from his backsling. But if they rushed him right now —

"Who are you?" asked a strong-faced, middle-aged man in the center of the semi-circle, his spear throbbing in an upraised arm. "What's your name — what's your people?"

"Eric the Only," Eric told him quickly. Then he remembered to add: "I'm destined to be Eric the Eye. My people are Mankind."

"He's expected, one of us," the middle-aged man told the others who immediately relaxed, slung their spears and went back to what they had been doing. "Welcome, Eric the Only of Mankind. Put up your spear and sit with us. I am Arthur the Organizer."

Eric gingerly dropped his spear into the back-sling. He studied the Stranger.

A man about as old as his uncle and not nearly as hefty, although well-muscled enough for normal warlike purposes. He wore the loin-straps of a full warrior, but — as if these were not enough honor for a man — he also wore straps laced about his chest and across his shoulders, though he was carrying no knapsack. This was the fashion of many Strangers, Eric knew, as was the strap at the back of the head that held the hair in a tight tail away from the eyes instead of letting it hang wild and free as the hair of a warrior should. And the straps were decorated with odd, incised designs — another weak and unmanlike Stranger fashion.

Who but Strangers, Eric thought contemptuously, would group up so in an alien place without setting sentries at either end of their burrow? Truly Mankind had good reason to despise them!

But this man was a leader, he realized, a born leader, with an even more self-assured air than Thomas the Trap-Smasher, captain of the best band in all Mankind. He was studying Eric in turn, with eyes that weighed carefully and then, having decided on the measure, made a definite placement, fitting Eric permanently into this plan or that plan. He looked like a man whose head was full of many plans, each one evolving inexorably through action to a predetermined end.

He took Eric's arm companionably and led him to where the others squatted and talked and worked. This was no tribal burrow of any sort: it was quite ap-

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parently a field headquarters — and Arthur the Organizer was Commander-in-Chief. "I met your uncle," he told Eric, "about a dozen auld lang synes ago, when he came to us on a trading expedition — back in our burrows, I mean. A fine man, your uncle, very progressive. He's attended our secret meetings regularly, and there's going to be an important place for him in the great burrows we will dig, in the new world we are making. He reminds me a lot of your father. But so do you, my boy, so do you."

"Did you know my father?"

ARTHUR the Organizer smiled and nodded. "Very well. He could have been a great man. He gave his life for the Cause. Who among us will ever forget Eric the — the — Eric the Storekeeper or something, wasn't it?"

"The Storeroom-Stormer. His name was Eric the Storeroom-Stormer."

"Yes, of course. Eric the Storeroom-Stormer. An unforgettable name with us, and an unforgettable man. But that's another story; we'll talk about it some other time. You'll have to be getting back to your uncle very soon." He picked up a flat board covered with odd markings and studied it with his glow lamp.

"How do you like that?" one of the men working with the unfamiliar materials muttered to his neighbor. "You ask him his people, and he says, 'Mankind.' *Mankind!*"

The other man chuckled. "A front-burrow tribe. What the hell do you expect — sophistication? Each and every front-burrow tribe calls itself Mankind. As far as these primitives are concerned, the human race stops at their outermost burrow. Your tribe, my tribe — you know what they call us? Strangers. In their eyes, there's not too much difference between us and the Monsters."

"That's what I mean. They don't see us as fellow-men. They are narrow-minded savages. Who needs them?"

Arthur the Organizer glanced at Eric's face. He turned sharply to the man who had spoken last.

"I'll tell you who needs them, Walter," he said. "The Cause needs them. If the front-burrow tribes are with us, it means our main lines of supply to Monster territory are kept open. But we need every fighter we can get, no matter how primitive. Every single tribe has to be with us if Alien-science is to be the dominant religion of the burrows, if we're to avoid the fiasco of the last rising. We need front-burrow men for their hunting, foraging skills and back-burrow men for their civilized skills. We need

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everybody in this thing, especially now."

The man called Walter put down his work and scowled at Eric dubiously. He seemed to be totally unconvinced.

These arrogant back-burrowers with their ornamented straps and unmilitary manners! Men from different tribes sitting around and talking, when — if they had any sense of propriety at all — they should be killing each other!

Suddenly, the floor shook under him. He almost fell. He staggered back and forth, trying to grab at the spears in his backsling. He finally got used to it, managed to find a solid footing in the upheaval. The spear he held vibrated in his hand.

FROM far away came a series of ear-splitting thumps. The floor swung to their rhythm. "What is it?" he cried, turning to Arthur. "What's going on?"

"You've never heard a Monster walking before?" the Organizer asked him unbelievingly. "That's right — this is your Theft, your first time out. It's a Monster, boy. A Monster's moving around in the Monster larder, doing whatever Monsters do. They have a right, you know," he added with a smile. "It's their larder. We're just — visitors."

Eric noticed that none of the others seemed particularly concerned. He drew a deep breath and reslung his spear. How the floor and the walls shook! What a fantastic, enormous creature that must be!

As an apprentice warrior, he had often stood with the rear-guard on the other side of the doorway to Monster territory while the band went in to steal for Mankind. A few times there had been heavy, thumping noises off in the distance, and the walls of the burrow had quivered slightly. But not like this. It had never been remotely as awesome as this.

He raised his eyes to the straight, flat ceiling of the burrow above them. He remembered the dark space further back stretching up limitlessly. "And this," he said aloud. "This structure we're in. What is *this* to them?"

Arthur the Organizer shrugged. "A piece of Monster furniture. Something they use for something or other. We're in one of the open spaces they always leave in the bases of their furniture. Makes the furniture lighter, easier to move around, I guess." He listened for a moment as the thumps drifted further away and then died out. "Let's get down to business. Eric, this is Walter the Weapon-Seeker. Walter the Weapon-Seeker of the Miximilian

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people. Walter, what do you have for Eric's tribe — for, uh, for Mankind?"

"I hate to give anything even halfway good to a front-burrow tribe," the squatting man muttered. "No matter how much you explain it to them, they always use it wrong, they botch it up every single time. Let's see. This should be simple enough."

He rummaged in the pile of strange stuff in front of him and picked up a small, red, jelly-like blob. "All you do," he explained, "is tear off a pinch with your fingers. Just a pinch at a time, no more. Then spit on it and throw it. After you spit on it, get it out of your hands fast. Throw it as fast and as far as you can. Do you think you can remember that?"

"Yes." Eric took the red blob from him and stared at it in puzzlement. There was a strange, irritating odor: it made his nose itch slightly. "But what happens? What does it do?"

"That's not your worry, boy," Arthur the Organizer told him. "Your uncle will know when to use it. You have your third category theft — a Monster souvenir that no one in your tribe has ever seen before. It should make them sit up and take notice. And tell your uncle to bring his band to my burrow three days — three sleep-periods — from now. That will be the last time we meet before the rising. Tell him to bring them armed with every last spear they can carry."

ERIC nodded weakly. There were so many complex, incomprehensible things going on! The world was a bigger, more active place than he had ever imagined.

He watched Arthur the Organizer add a mark to the flat board on which many symbols were scratched. This was another Stranger practice — made necessary, he knew, by the weak Stranger memory, so inferior to that of Mankind.

The Weapon-Seeker leaped up and stopped him as he was about to put the red blob into knapsack. "Nothing wet in there?" Walter demanded, opening the bag and rummaging about in Eric's belongings. "No water? Remember, get this stuff wet and you're done for."

"Mankind keeps its water in canteens," Eric explained irritably. "We keep it here," he pointed to the sloshing pouch at his hip, "not splashing around loosely with our provisions." He swung the full knapsack on his back and stepped away with stiff dignity.

Arthur the Organizer accompanied him to the end of the burrow. "Don't mind Walter," he

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whispered. "He's always afraid that nobody but himself will be able to use the Monster weapons he digs up. He talks that way to everyone. Now, suppose I refresh your memory about the way back. We don't want you to get lost."

"I won't get lost," Eric said coldly. "I have a good memory, and I know enough to perform a simple reversal of the directions on the way here. Besides, I am Eric the Espier, Eric the Eye of Mankind. I won't get lost."

He was rather proud of himself as he trotted away, without turning his head. Let the Strangers know what you think of them. The snobs. The stuck-up bastards.

But still, he felt damaged somehow, made less — as when Roy the Runner had called him a singleton before the entire band. And the last comment he had heard behind him — "These primitives: so damned touchy!" — made it no better.

He crossed the dark open space, still brooding, his eyes fixed on the patch of white light ahead, his mind engaged in a completely unaccustomed examination of values. Mankind's free simplicity against the Stranger multiplicity and intricacy. Mankind's knowledge of basics, the important foraging basics of day-to-day life, against the Stranger knowledge of so many things and techniques he had never even heard about. Surely Mankind's way was infinitely preferable, far superior?

Then why did his uncle want to get mixed up with Stranger politics, he wondered, as he emerged from the structure? He turned left and, passing the small entrance he had ignored before, sped for the wall which separated him from the burrows. And why did all these Strangers, evidently each from a different tribe, agree in the contempt with which they held Mankind?

He had just turned right along the wall, on the last stretch before the doorway, when the floor shook again, jarring him out of his thoughts. He bounced up and down, frozen with fear where he stood.

He was out in the open while a Monster was abroad. A Monster had come into the larder again.

VI

FAR OFF in the dazzling distance, he caught sight of the tremendously long gray body he had heard about since childhood, hgher than a hundred men standing on each other's shoulders, the thick gray legs each wider than two hefty men standing chest to chest. He caught just one wide-

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eyed, fear-soluble glimpse of the thing before he went into complete panic.

His panic was redeemed by a single inhibition: he didn't spring forward and run away from the wall. But that was only because it would have meant running directly toward the Monster. For one thoroughly insane moment, however, he thought of trying to claw his way through the wall against which his shoulders were pressed.

Then — because it was the direction he had been running in — he remembered the doorway. He must be about thirty, thirty-five paces from it. There lay safety: his uncle, the band, Mankind and the burrows — the blessed, closed-in, narrow burrows!

Eric leaped along the wall for the doorway. He ran as he'd never in his life run before, as he'd never imagined he could run.

But even as he fled madly, almost weeping at the effort he was making, a few sane thoughts — the result of long, tiresome drills as an initiate — organized themselves in his screaming mind. He had been closer to the structure in which the Strangers were hiding, the structure which Arthur the Organizer explained was a piece of Monster furniture. He should have turned the other way, towards the structure, gotten between it and the wall. There, unless he'd been seen as the Monster entered the larder, he could have rested safely until it was possible to make his escape.

He had gone too far to turn back now. But run silently, he reminded himself: run swiftly but make no noise, make no noise at all. According to the lessons that the warriors taught, at this distance Monster hearing was more to be feared than Monster vision. Run silently. Run for your life.

He reached the door. It had been set back in place!

In disbelief and utter horror he stared at the curved line in the wall that showed where the door had been replaced in its socket. But this was never done! This had never been heard of!

Eric beat frantically on the door with his fists. Would his knuckles make enough noise to penetrate the heavy slab? Or just enough to attract the Monster's attention?

He twisted his head quickly — a look, a deliberately wasted moment, to estimate the closeness of his danger. The Monster's legs moved so slowly: its speed would have been laughable if the very size of those legs didn't serve to push it forward an incredible distance with each step. And there was nothing laughable

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in that long, narrow neck, almost as long as the rest of the body, and the malevolent, relatively tiny head on the end of the neck. And those horrible pink things, all around the neck, just behind the head —

It was much nearer than it had been just seconds ago, but whether it had noticed him and was coming at him he had no idea. Beat at the door with the shaft of a spear? That should attract attention, that might be heard.

Yes, by the Monster too.

THERE was only one thing to do. He stepped a few paces back from the wall. Then he leaped forward, smashing his shoulder into the door. He felt it give a little. Another try.

The floor-shaking thumps of the Monster's steps were now so close as to be almost deafening. At any moment, a great gray foot might come down and grind out his life. Eric stepped back again, forcing himself not to look up.

Another leap, another bruising collision with the door. It had definitely moved. An indentation showed all around it.

Was he about to be stepped on — to be squashed?

Eric put his hands on the door. He pushed. Slowly, suckingly, it left the place out of which it had been carved long ago.

Where was the Monster? How close? How Close?

Suddenly, the door fell over into the burrow, and Eric spilled painfully on top of it. He scrambled to his feet and darted down the corridor.

He had no time to feel relief. His mind was repeating its lessons, reminding him what he had to do next in such a situation.

Run a short distance down the burrow. Then stop and wait on the balls of your feet, ready to bolt. Get as much air into your lungs as possible. You may need it. If you hear a hissing, whistling sound, stop breathing and start running. Hold your breath for as long as you can — as long as you possibly can — then suck another chestful of air and keep running. Keep this up until you are far away. Far, far away.

Eric waited, poised to run, his back to the doorway.

Don't look around — just face the direction you'll have to run. There's only one thing you have to worry about, only one thing you have to listen for. A hissing, whistling sound. When you hear it, hold your breath and run.

He waited, his muscles contracted for instant action.

Time went by. He remembered to count. If you counted up to five hundred, slowly, and nothing happened, you were likely to be all right. You could assume the

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Monster probably hadn't noticed you.

So the experienced warriors said, the men who had lived through such an experience.

Five hundred. He reached five hundred and, just to be on the safe side, still tense, still ready to run, counted another five hundred, up to the ultimate number conceived by man, a full thousand.

No hissing, no whistling sounds. No suggestion of danger.

He relaxed, and his muscles — suddenly set free — gave way. He fell to the floor of the burrow, whimpering with the release of tension.

It was over. His Theft was over. He was a man.

HE had been in the same place as a Monster, and lived through it. He had met Strangers and dealt with them as a representative of Mankind. Such things as he would have to tell his uncle!

His uncle. Where was his uncle? Where was the band?

Suddenly fully aware of how much was wrong, Eric scrambled to his feet and walked cautiously back to the open doorway. The burrow was empty. They hadn't waited for him.

But that was another incredible thing! A band never gave an initiate up for lost until at least two full days had gone by. In the chief's absence, of course, this was measured by the sleep periods of the band captain. Any band would wait two days before giving up and turning homeward. And, Eric was positive, his uncle would have waited a bit longer than that for *him*. He'd been away for such a short time! Then what had happened?

He crept to the doorway and peeped outside. There was almost no dizziness this time. His eyes adjusted quickly to the different scale of distance. The Monster was busy on the other side of the larder. It had merely been crossing the room, then, not pursuing and attacking. Apparently it hadn't noticed him at all.

Fantastic. And with all the noise he had made! All that rushing back and forth, that battering-down of the door!

The Monster turned abruptly, walked a few gigantic steps and hurled itself at the structure in which Eric had met the Strangers. The walls, the floor, everything, shook mightily in sympathy to the impact of the great organism as it wriggled a bit and became still.

Eric was startled until he realized that the creature had done no more than lie down in the structure. It *was* a piece of Monster furniture, after all.

How had that felt to Arthur

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the Organizer and Walter the Weapon-Seeker and the others hidden in the base? Eric grinned. Those Strangers must be a little less haughty, a little more sober at this moment.

Meanwhile, he had work to do, things to find out.

He got his fingers under the slab of door and tugged it upright. It was heavy! He pushed against it, slowly, carefully, first one side and then the other, walking it back to the hole in the wall. A final push, and it slid into place tightly, only the thin, curved line suggesting its existence.

Now he could look around.

There had been a fight here — that much was certain. A brief, bitter battle. Examining the area closely, Eric saw unmistakable signs of conflict.

A broken spear shaft. Some blood on the wall. Part of a torn knapsack. No bodies, of course. You were not likely to find bodies after a battle. Any people of the burrows knew that the one unavoidable imperative of victory was to drag the bodies away and dispose of them. No one might ever leave dead enemies to rot where they would foul the corridors.

SO there had been a battle. He had been right — his uncle and his uncle's band had not just gone off and left him. There must have been an attack by a superior force. The band had stood its ground for a while, sustained some losses, and then been forced to retreat.

But there were a few things which didn't make sense. First, it was very unusual for a war party of Strangers to come this close to Monster territory. The burrows which were inhabited by Mankind, the natural goal of a war party, were much further back. At this point, you would not expect to find any group larger than a foraging expedition — a Stranger band at most.

His uncle's men, fully armed, operating under battle alert, could easily cope with a single band of weavers, weaponsmiths or traders from the decadent back burrows. They would have driven them off, possibly taking a few prisoners, and continued to wait for him.

That left only two possibilities. The unlikely war party — a two or three-band attack — and, even more unlikely, a band from another fierce, front-burrow people. But front-burrowers rarely went prowling at random near Monster territory. They would have their own door cut into it and would tend to feel hugely uncertain about one belonging to another people. They too would head for the inhabited burrows if they were on any business other than

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the important one of stealing for their tribe's needs.

And another thing. Unless his uncle's band had been wiped out to the very last man — a thought Eric rejected as highly improbable — the survivors were honor-bound, by their oath of manhood, after doing whatever the immediate military situation required, from pursuit to retreat, to return as soon as possible to the spot where an initiate was expected back from his Theft. No warrior would dare face the women if he failed to do this.

Possibly the attack had just come. Possibly his uncle's band was a short distance away, still fighting their way from burrow's end to burrow's end; and, once they had gotten clear of the enemy, would make their way back to him.

No. In that case, he should be able to hear the battle still going on. And the burrows were dreadfully still.

Eric shivered. A warrior was not meant to be abroad without companions. He'd heard of tribeless Strangers — once, as a child, he remembered enjoying the intricate execution of a man who'd been expelled from his own people for some major crime and who had wandered pathetically into the neighborhood of Mankind — but these people were hardly to be considered human: tribes, bands, societies, were the surroundings of human creatures.

It was awful to be alone. It was unthinkable.

WITHOUT bothering to eat, though he was quite hungry after his Theft, he began walking rapidly down the corridor. After a while, he broke into a trot. He wanted to get home as soon as possible — to be among his own kind again.

He reached into his back-sling and got a spear for each hand.

A nervous business going through the corridors all by yourself. They were so empty and so quiet. They hadn't seemed this quiet when he'd been on expedition with the band. And so fearfully, frighteningly dim. Eric had never before realized how much difference there was between the light you got from one forehead glow-lamp and the usual band complement of a half-dozen. He found himself getting more and more wary of the unexpected shadows where the wall curved sharply: he picked up speed as he ran past the black hole of a branching burrow.

At any one of those places, an enemy could be waiting for him, warned by the sound of his approaching footsteps. It could be the same enemy which had attacked his uncle's band, a handful of cruel and murderous

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Strangers, or a horde of them. It could be something worse. Abruptly he remembered legends of unmentionable creatures who lurked in the empty burrows, creatures who fled before the approach of a band of warriors, but who would come noiselessly upon a single man. Big creatures who engulfed you. Tiny creatures who came in their hundreds and nibbled you to pieces. Eric kept jerking his head around to look behind him: at least he could keep his doom from taking him by surprise.

It was *awful* to be alone.

And yet, in the midst of his fears, his mind returned again and again to the problem of his uncle's disappearance. Eric could not believe anything serious had happened to him. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was a veteran of too many bloody adventures, too many battles against unequal odds. Then where had he gone? And where had he taken the band?

And why was there no sound of him anywhere, no sign in all this infinity of gloomy, stretching, menace-filled tunnels?

Fortunately, he was an Eye. He knew the way back and sped desperately along it without the slightest feeling of doubt. The Record Machine was right: he would never be lost. Let him just get safely back to the companionship of Mankind and he would be Eric the Eye.

And there it was again: who had been right, the Record Machine or his uncle? The vision that named him had come from the Record Machine, but his uncle claimed that this was religious claptrap. The vision had been selected and his name proposed to the women well in advance of the ceremony. And his uncle was an Alien-sciencer, in touch with Strangers who were also Alien-sciencers. . . .

So many things had happened in the last two days, Eric felt. So much of his world had shifted. It was as if the walls of the burrows had moved outward and upward until they resembled Monster territory more than human areas.

HE WAS getting close now. These corridors looked friendlier, more familiar. He made himself run faster, although he was almost at the point of exhaustion. He wanted to be home, to be officially Eric the Eye, to inform Mankind of what had happened so that a rescue and searching party could be sent out for his uncle.

That doorway to Monster territory: who had replaced it? If a battle had been fought, and his uncle's band had retreated, still fighting, would the attacker have

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stopped to put the door neatly back in its socket? No.

Could it be explained by a sudden onslaught and the complete extermination of his uncle's band? Then, before dragging the bodies away, the enemy would have had time to put the door back. A doorway into Monster territory was a valuable human resource, after all, valuable to Mankind and Strangers alike — why jeopardize it by leaving it visible and open?

But who — or what — could have been capable of such a sudden onslaught, such a complete extermination of the best-led band in all Mankind? He'd have to get the answer from one of the other band captains or possibly a wise old crone in the Female Society.

Definitely within the boundaries of Mankind now, Eric forced himself to slow to a walk. He would be coming upon a sentry at any moment, and he had no desire at all to have a spear flung through him. A sentry would react violently to a man dashing out of the darkness.

"Eric the Only," he called out, identifying himself with each step. "This is Eric the Only." Then he remembered his Theft proudly and changed the identification. "Eric the Eye. This is Eric the Eye, the Espier, the further-seeing, less-paying Eye. Eric the Eye is coming back to Mankind!"

Oddly, there was no returning call of recognition. Eric didn't understand that. Had Mankind itself been attacked and driven away from its burrow? A sentry should respond to a familiar name. Something was very, inexplicably wrong.

Then he came around the last curve and saw the sentry at the other end. Rather, he saw what at first looked like three sentries. They were staring at him, and he recognized them. Stephen the Strong-Armed and two members of Stephen's band. Evidently he had arrived just at the moment when the sentry on duty was about to be relieved. That would account for Stephen and the other man. But why hadn't they replied to his shouts of identification?

They stood there silently as he came up, their spears still at the ready, not going down in welcome. "Eric the Eye," he repeated, puzzled. "I've made my Theft, but something happened to the rest — "

His voice trailed off, as Stephen came up to him, his face grim, his powerful muscles taut. The band captain shoved a spear point hard against Eric's chest. "Don't move," he warned. "Barney. John. Tie him up. We've caught the little rat!"

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VII

HIS spears taken from him, his arms bound securely behind his back by the thongs of his own knapsack, Eric was pushed and prodded into the great central burrow of Mankind.

The place was almost unrecognizable.

Under the direction of Ottilie, the Chieftain's First Wife, a horde of women — what seemed at first like the entire membership of the Female Society — was setting up a platform in front of the Royal Mound. With the great scarcity of any building materials that Mankind suffered from, a construction of this sort was startling and unusual, yet there was something about it that awoke highly unpleasant memories in Eric's mind. But he was pulled from place to place too fast and there were too many other unprecedented things going on for him to be able to identify the memory properly.

Two women who were accredited members of the Female Society were not working under Ottilie's direction, he noticed. Bound hand and foot, they were lying against the far wall of the great central burrow. They were both covered with blood and showed every sign of having undergone prolonged and most vicious torture. He judged them to be barely this side of death.

As he was jerked past, he recognized them. They were the two wives of Thomas the Trap-Smasher.

Just wait until his uncle got back! Someone would really pay for this, he thought, more in absolute amazement than horror. He had the feeling that he must keep the horror away at all costs. Once let it in and it would soak through his thoughts right into the memory he was trying to avoid.

The place was full of armed men, running back and forth from their band captains to unknown destinations in the outlying corridors. Between them and around them scuttled the children, fetching and carrying raw materials for the hard-working women. There was a steady buzz of commands in the air . . . "Go to —" "Bring some more —" "Hurry with the —" . . . that mingled with the smell of many people whose pores were sweating urgency. And it wasn't just sweat that he smelled. Eric realized as he was dragged before the Royal Mound. It was anger. The anger and fear of all Mankind.

Franklin the Father of Many Thieves stood on the mound, carrying unaccustomed spears in his fat hands, talking rapidly to a group of warriors, band captains and — yes, actually! — *Strangers.* Even now, Eric found he could

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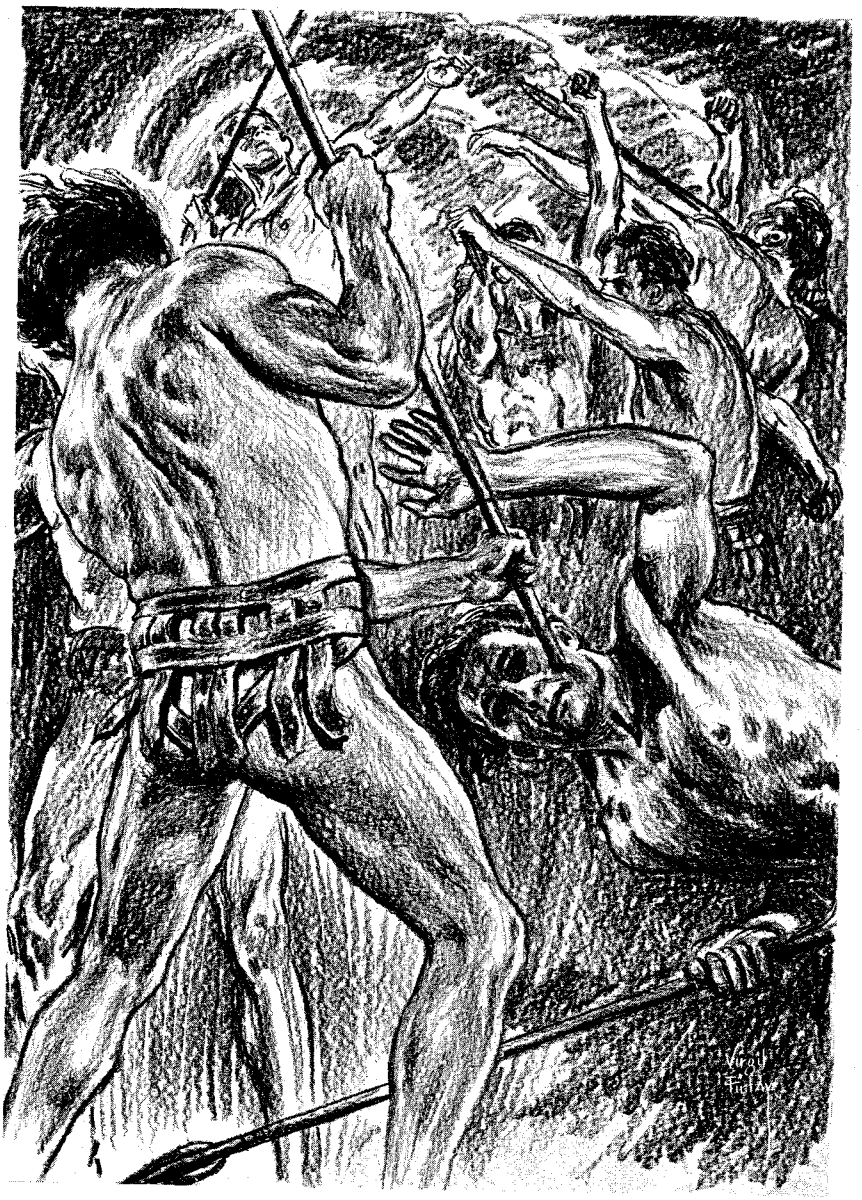

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still be astonished at this fantastic development.

Strangers in the very midst of Mankind! Walking around freely and bearing arms!

As the chief caught sight of Eric, his face broke into a loose-skinned smile. He nudged a Stranger beside him and pointed at the prisoner.

"That's him," he said. "That's the nephew. The one that asked for the third category Theft. Now we've got them all."

The Stranger didn't smile. He looked briefly at Eric and turned away. "I'm glad you think so. From our point of view, you've just got one more."

FRANKLIN'S smile faded to an uncertain grin. "Well, you know what I mean. And the damned fool came back by himself. It saved us a lot of trouble, I mean, didn't it?" Receiving no answer, he shrugged. He gestured with flabby imperiousness at Eric's guards. "You know where to put him. We'll be ready for them pretty soon."

Again the point of a spear stabbed into Eric's back, and he was forced forward across the central space to a small burrow entrance. Before he could reach it, however, he heard Franklin the Father of Many Thieves call out to Mankind: "There goes Eric, my people. Eric the Only. Now we've got the last of the filthy gang!"

For a moment, the activity stopped and seemed to focus on him. Eric shivered as a low, drawn-out grunt of viciousness and hatred arose everywhere, but most of all from the women.

Someone ran up to him. Harriet the History-Teller. The girl's face was absolutely contorted. She reached up to the crown of her head and pulled out the long pin held in place by a few knotted scarlet hairs. About her face and neck the hair danced like flames.

"You Alien - sciencer!" she shrieked, driving the pin straight at his eyes. "You filthy, filthy Alien-sciencer!"

Eric whipped his head to one side; she was back at him in a moment. His guards leaped at the girl and grappled with her, but she was able to get in one ripping slash that opened up almost all of his right cheek before they drove her away.

"Leave something for the rest of us," one of his guards pleaded the cause of reason as he strolled back to Eric. "After all, he belongs to the whole of Mankind."

"He does not!" she yelled. "He belongs to me most of all. I was going to mate with him when he returned from his Theft, wasn't I, Mother?"

"There wasn't anything official," Eric heard Rita the Record-

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Keeper admonishing as he tried to stanch the flow of blood by bringing his shoulder up and pressing it against the wound. "There couldn't be anything official about it until he'd achieved manhood. So you'll just have to wait your turn, Harriet, darling. You'll have to wait until your elders are finished with him. There'll be plenty left for you."

"There won't be," the girl pouted. "I know what you're like. There won't be hardly anything left."

Eric was shoved at the small burrow entrance again. The moment he was inside it, one of his guards planted a foot in his back, knocking the breath out of him. The kick propelled him forward, staggering wildly for balance, until he smashed into the opposite wall. As he fell, unable to use his arms to cushion himself, he heard laughter behind him in the great central burrow. He rolled on his side dizzily. There was a fresh flow of blood coming down from his cheek.

This wasn't the homecoming he'd imagined after his Theft — not in the slightest! What was going on?

He knew where he was. A tiny, blind-alley burrow off Mankind's major meeting-place, a sort of little vault used mostly for storage. Excess food and goods stolen from Monster territory were kept here until there was enough accumulated for a trading expedition to the back burrows. Occasionally, also, a male Stranger, taken prisoner in battle, might be held in this place until Mankind found out if his tribe valued him enough to pay anything substantial for his recovery.

And if they didn't . . .

ERIC remembered the unusual structure that the women had been building near the Royal Mound — and shivered. The memory that he'd suppressed had now come alive in his mind. And it fitted with the way Harriet had acted — and with what her mother, Rita the Record-Keeper, had said.

They couldn't be planning that for him! He was a member of Mankind, almost a full warrior. They didn't even do that to Strangers captured in battle — not *normal* Strangers. A warrior was always respected as a warrior. At the worst, he deserved a decent execution, quietly done. Except for — Except for —

"*No*!" he screamed. "*No*!"

The single guard who'd been left on duty at the entrance turned around and regarded him humorously.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Oh, definitely yes! We're going to have a lot of fun with both of you, as soon as the women say they're

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ready." He nodded with ominous, emphatic slowness and turned back to miss none of the preparations.

Both of you? For the first time, Eric looked around the little storage burrow. The place was almost empty of goods, but off to one side, in the light of his forehead glow-lamp (how proud he had been when it had been bestowed on him at the doorway to Monster territory!) he now saw another man lying bound against the wall.

His uncle.

Eric brought his knees up and wriggled rapidly over to him. It was a painful business. His belly and sides were not calloused and inured to the rough burrow floor like his feet. But what did a few scratches more or less matter any more?

The Trap-Smasher was barely conscious. He had been severely handled, and he looked almost as bad as his wives. There was a thick crust of dried blood on his hair. The haft of a spear, Eric guessed, had all but cracked his head open. And in several places on his body, his right shoulder, just above his left hip, deep in his thigh, were the oozing craters of serious spear wounds, raw and unbandaged.

"Uncle Thomas," Eric urged. "What happened? Who did this to you?"

THE wounded man opened his eyes and shuddered. He looked around stupidly as if he had expected to find the walls talking to him. And his powerful arms struggled with the knots that held them firmly behind his back. When he finally located Eric, he smiled.

It was a bad thing to do. Someone had also smashed in most of his front teeth.

"Hello, Eric," he mumbled. "What a fight, eh? How did the rest of the band do? Anybody get away?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm asking *you!* I came back from my Theft — you were gone — the band was gone. I got here, and everyone's crazy! There are Strangers out there, walking around with weapons in our burrows. Who are they?"

Thomas the Trap-Smasher's eyes had slowly darkened. They were fully in focus now, and long threads of agony swam in them. "Strangers?" he asked in a low voice. "Yes, there were Strangers fighting in Stephen the Strong-Armed's band. Fighting against us. That chief of ours — Franklin — he got in touch with Strangers after we left. They compared notes. They must have been working together, been in touch with each other, for a long time. Mankind, Strangers, what difference does it make when their lousy

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Ancestor-science is threatened? I should have remembered."

"What?" Eric begged. "What should you have remembered?"

"That's the way they put down Alien-science in the other rising, long ago. A chief's a chief. He's got more in common with another chief — even a chief of Strangers — than with his own people. You attack Ancestor-science, and you're attacking their power as chiefs. They'll work together then. They'll give each other men, weapons, information. They'll do everything they can against the *common enemy. Against the only* people who really want to hit back at the Monsters. I should have remembered! Damn it all," the Trap-Smasher groaned through his ruined mouth, "I saw that the chief and Ottilie were suspicious. I should have realized how they were going to handle it. They were going to call in Strangers, exchange information — and unite against us!"

Eric stared at his uncle, dimly understanding. Just as there was a secret organization of Alien-sciencers that cut across tribal boundaries, so there was a tacit, rarely-used understanding among the chiefs, based on the Ancestor-science religion that was the main prop of their power. *And* the power of the leaders of the Female Society, come to think of it. All special privileges were derived from their knowledge of ancestor-science. Take that away from them, and they'd be ordinary women with no more magical abilities than was necessary to tell edible food from Monster poison.

Grunting with pain, Thomas the Trap-Smasher wormed his way up to a sitting position against the wall. He kept shaking his head as if to jar recollection loose.

"They came up to us," he said heavily, "Stephen the Strong-Armed and his band came up to us just *after you'd gone into Mon*ster territory. A band from Mankind with a message from the chief — who suspected anything? They might be coming to tell us that the home burrows were under attack by Strangers. Strangers!" He gave a barking laugh, and some blood splashed out of his mouth. "They had Strangers with them, hidden all the way behind in the corridors. Mobs and mobs of Strangers."

ERIC began to visualize what had happened.

"Then, when they were among us, when most of us had reslung our spears, they hit us. Eric, they hit us real good. They had us so much by surprise that they didn't even need outside help. I don't think there was much left of us by the time the Strangers

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came running up. I was down, fighting with my bare hands, and so was the rest of the band. The Strangers did the mopping up. I didn't see most of it. Somebody handed me one hell of a wallop — I never expected to wake up alive." His voice got even lower and huskier. "I'd have been lucky not to."

The Trap - Smasher's chest heaved: a strange, long noise came out of it. "They brought me back here. My wives — they were working on my wives. Those bitches from the Female Society — Ottilie, Rita — this part of it is their business — they had my wives pegged out and they worked on them in front of me. I was blanking out and coming to, blanking out and coming to; I was conscious while they —"

He dropped to a bloody mumble again, his head falling forward loosely. His voice became clear for a moment, but not entirely rational. "They were good women," he muttered. "Both of them. Good, good girls. And they loved me. They had their chance to become more important. A dozen times Franklin must have offered to impregnate them, and they turned him down every time. They really loved me."

Eric almost sobbed himself. He'd had little to do with them once he'd reached the age of the warrior initiate, but in his childhood, they'd given him all the mother love he ever remembered. They'd cuffed him and caressed him and wiped his nose. They'd told him stories and taught him the catechism of the ancestral science. Neither had sons of his age who had survived the various plagues and the Monster-inflicted calamities that periodically swept through Mankind's burrows. He'd been lucky. He'd received much of the care and affection that their own sons might have enjoyed.

Their fidelity to the Trap-Smasher had been a constant source of astonishment in Mankind. It had cost them more than the large, healthy litters for which the chief had a well proven capacity: such eccentric, almost non-womanly behavior had inevitably denied them the high positions in the Female Society they would otherwise have enjoyed.

And now they were dead or dying, and their surviving babies had been apportioned to other women whose importance would thereby be substantially increased.

"Tell me," he asked his uncle. "Why did the Female Society kill them? What did they do that was so awful?"

He saw that Thomas had lifted his head again and was staring at him. With pity. He felt his own

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body turn completely cold even before the Trap-Smasher spoke.

"You still won't let yourself think about it? I don't blame you, Eric. But it's there. It's being prepared for us outside."

"What?" Eric demanded, although a distant part of him had already worked out the terrible answer and knew what it was.

"We've been declared outlaws, Eric. They say we're guilty of the ultimate sacrilege against Ancestor-Science. We don't belong to Mankind anymore—you, me, my family, my band. We're outside Mankind, outside the law, outside religion. And you know what happens to outlaws, Eric, don't you? Anything goes. *Anything.*"

VIII

EVER since early childhood, Eric remembered looking forward to ceremonies of this sort. A Stranger would have been caught by one of the warrior bands, and it would be determined that he was an outlaw. Nine times out of ten, such a man was easy enough to identify. No one but an outlaw, for example, would be wandering the burrows by himself, without a band or at least a single companion to guard his back. The tenth time, when there was the slightest doubt, a request for ransom to his people would make the prisoner's position clear. There would be a story of some unforgivable sacrilege, some particularly monstrous crime that could be punished by nothing but complete anathema and the revocation of all privileges as a human being. The man had escaped the punishment being prepared for him. Do with him as you will, his people would say. He is no longer one of us; he is the same as a Monster; he is something non-human so far as we are concerned.

Then a sort of holiday would be declared. Out of the bits and pieces of lumber stolen from Monster territory and set aside by the women for this purpose, the members of the Female Society would erect a structure whose specifications had been handed down from mother to daughter for countless generations — all the way back to the ancestors who had built the Record-Machines. It was called a Stage or a Theater, although Eric had also heard it referred to as The Scaffold. In any case, whatever its true name, most of the details concerning it were part of the secret lore of the Female Society and, as such, were no proper concern of males.

One thing about it, however, everyone knew. On it would be enacted a moving religious drama: the ultimate triumph of hu-

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manity over the wickedness of the Monsters.

For this, the central character had to fulfill two requirements. He had to be an intelligent creature, as the Monsters were, so that he could be made to suffer as some day Mankind meant the Monsters to suffer; and he had to be non-human, as the Monsters were, so that every drop of fear, resentment and hatred distilled by the enormous swaggering aliens could be poured out upon his flesh without any inhibition of compunction or fellow-feeling.

For this purpose, outlaws were absolutely ideal, since all agreed that such disgusting creatures had resigned their membership in the human race.

WHEN an outlaw was caught, work stopped in the burrows, and Mankind's warrior bands were called home. It was a great time, a joyous time, a time of festival. Even the children—doing whatever they could to prepare for the glorious event, running errands for the laboring women, fetching refreshment for the stalwart, guarding men — even the children boasted to each other of how they would express their hatred upon this trapped representative of the non-human, this bound and shrieking protagonist of the utterly alien.

Everyone had their chance. All, from the chief himself to the youngest child capable of reciting the catechism of ancestral science, all climbed in their turn upon the Stage — or Theater — or Scaffold — that the women had erected. All were thrilled to vent a portion of Mankind's vengeance upon the creature who had been declared alien, as an earnest of what they would some day do collectively to the Monsters who had stolen their world.

Sarah the Sickness-Healer had her turn early in the proceedings; thenceforth, she stood on the structure and carefully supervised the ceremony. It was her job to see that nobody went too far, that everyone had a fair and adequate turn, and that even at the end there was some life left in the victim. Because then, at the end, the structure had to be completely burned — along with its bloody occupant — as a symbol of how the Monsters must eventually be turned into ash and be blown away and vanish.

"And Mankind will come into its own," she would chant, while the charred fragments were kicked out of the burrow contemptuously. *"And the Monsters will be gone. They will be gone forever, and there will be nothing upon all the wide Earth but Mankind."*

Afterwards, there was feasting, there was sing-

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ing. Men and women chased each other into the dimmer side corridors; children whooped and yelled around the great central burrow; the few old folks went to sleep with broad, reminiscent smiles upon their faces. Everyone felt they had somehow struck back at the Monsters. Everyone felt a little like the lords of creation their ancestors had been.

Eric remembered the things he himself had done — the things he had seen others do — on these occasions. A tremendous tic of fear rippled through his body. He had to draw his shoulders up to his neck in a tight hunch and tense the muscles of his arms and legs. Finally his nerves subsided.

He could think again. Only he didn't want to think.

Those others, those outlaws in previous ceremonies of this sort in auld lang synes long past — was it possible that they had experienced the same sick, bewildered dread while waiting for the structure to be completed? Had they trembled like this, had they also felt wetness running down their backs, had they felt the same pleading squirm in their intestines, the same anticipatory twinges of soft, vulnerable flesh?

THE thought had never crossed his mind before. He'd seen them as things completely outside humanity, the compressed symbol of all that was alien. One worried about their feelings no more than about those of the roaches scurrying madly about here in the storage burrow. One squashed them slowly or rapidly — at one's pleasure. What difference did it make? You didn't sympathize with roaches. You didn't identify with them.

But now that he was about to be squashed himself, he realized that it did make a difference. He was human. No matter what Mankind and its leaders now declared him to be, he was human. He felt human fears; he experienced a desperate human desire to live.

Then so had the others been. The outlaws whom he'd helped tear to pieces. Human. Completely human.

They'd sat here, just as he did now, they'd sat and waited for the festival and its agonies . . .

Only twice in his memory had members of Mankind ever been declared outlaw. Both cases had occurred a long time ago, before he'd even been a warrior-initiate. Eric tried now to remember what they had been like as living people. He wanted to reach out and feel companionship, some sort of companionship, even that of the dead. The dead were better than this beaten, bloody man next to him who had subsided into half-insane mumbles, his battered

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head on his torn and wound-scribbled chest.

What had they been like? It was no use. In the first case, memory brought back only a picture of a screaming hulk just before the fire was lit. No recollection of a man. No fellow-human in Mankind. And in the second case —

Eric sat bolt upright, straining against his bonds. The second man to be declared an outlaw had escaped! How he had done it Eric had never found out: he remembered only that a guard was severely punished, and that bands of warriors had sniffed for him along far-distant corridors for a long time afterward.

Escape. That was it. He had to escape. Once declared an outlaw, he could have no hope of mercy, no remission of sentence. The religious overtones of the ceremony being prepared were too highly charged to be halted for anything short of the disappearance of its chief protagonist.

Yes, escape. But how? Even if he could get free of the knots which so expertly and so strongly tied his hands behind his back, he had no weapon to hand. The guard at the entrance would transfix him with a spear in a moment. And if he failed, there were others outside, almost the entire warrior strength of the people.

How? *How*? He forced himself to be calm, to go over every possible alternative in his mind. He knew there was not much time. In a little while, the structure would be finished and the leaders of the Female Society would come for him.

ERIC began working on the knots behind him. He worked without much hope. If he could get his hands loose, perhaps he might squirm his way carefully to the entrance, leap up suddenly and break into a run. So what if they threw a spear through him — wouldn't that be better and quicker than the other thing?

But they wouldn't, he realized. Not unless he were very lucky and some warrior forgot to think straight. In cases like this, when it was a matter of keeping, not killing a prisoner, you aimed for the legs. There were at least a dozen men in Mankind with skill great enough to bring him down even at twenty or twenty-five paces. And another dozen who might be able to catch him. He was no Roy the Runner, after all.

Roy! He was dead and sewered by now. He found himself regretting the fight he'd had with Roy.

A Stranger passed by the storage burrow entrance, glancing in with only a slight curiosity. He was followed in a moment by two

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more Strangers, going the same way. They were leaving, Eric guessed, before the ceremony began. They probably had ceremonies of their own to attend — with their own people.

Walter the Weapon-Seeker, Arthur the Organizer—were they at this moment sitting in similar storage burrows awaiting the same slow death? Eric doubted it. Somehow he couldn't see these men caught as easily as he and his uncle had been. Arthur was too clever, he was certain of that, and Walter, well, Walter would come up with some fantastic weapon that no one had ever seen or heard of . . .

Like the one he had in his knapsack right now — that red blob the Weapon-Seeker had given him!

Was it a weapon? He didn't know. But even if it wasn't, he had the impression it could create some kind of surprise. "It should make them sit up and take notice," Walter had said back in Monster territory.

Any kind of surprise, any kind of upset and he might have a diversion under cover of which he and his uncle could escape.

But that was the trouble. His uncle. With his hands bound as thoroughly as he could now ascertain they were, he needed his uncle's help to do anything at all. And the Trap-Smasher was obviously too far gone to be at all useful.

He was talking to himself in a steady, monotonous, argumentative mutter, his upper body slumping further and further across his own lap. Every once in a while, the mutters would be broken by a sharp, almost surprised moan as his wounds woke into a clearer consciousness of themselves.

Most other men in his condition, Eric judged, would have been dead by now. Only a body as powerful as the Trap-Smasher's could have lasted this long. And — who knew? — if they could escape, it was possible that his uncle's wounds, given care and rest, might heal.

If they could escape.

"UNCLE THOMAS," he said, leaning toward him and whispering urgently. "I think I know a way out. I think I've figured out a way to escape."

No response. The bloody head continued to talk in a low, toneless voice to the lap. Mutter, mutter, mutter. Moan. Mutter, mutter.

"Your wives," Eric said desperately. "Your wives. Don't you want to get revenge for your wives?

That seemed to be worth a flicker. "My wives," said the thick voice. "They were good women.

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Real good women. They never let Franklin near them. They were real good women." Then the flicker was over and the mutters returned.

"Escape!" Eric whispered. "Don't you want to escape?"

A thin, coagulating line of blood dripped out of his uncle's slowly working jaws. There was no other answer.

Eric looked towards the entrance of the storage burrow. The guard posted there was no longer turning from time to time to glance at the prisoners. The structure outside was evidently nearing completion, and his interest in the final preparations had caused him to take a step or two away from the entrance. He was staring off to the left down the great central burrow in absolute fascination.

Well, that was something. It gave them a chance. On the other hand, it also meant that they had scant moments left to their lives. Any time now, the leaders of the Female Society would be coming to drag them to the torture ceremony.

With his eyes on the guard, Eric leaned against the rough burrow wall and began scraping the imprisoning knapsack thongs against the sharpest edges he could find. It wouldn't be fast enough, he realized. If there were only a spear point in this place, something sharp. He looked around feverishly. No, nothing. A few tumbled bags of food over which lazy roaches wandered. Nothing he could use to help him get free.

His uncle was his only hope. Somehow he had to rouse the man, get through to him. He squirmed up close, his mouth against the Trap-Smasher's battered ear.

"This is Eric, Eric the Only. Do you remember me, Uncle? I went on the Theft, Uncle Thomas, I went on the Theft with you. Third category. Remember, I asked for a third category theft, just like you told me to? I did my Theft, I was successful, I made it. I did just what you told me to do. I'm Eric the Eye now, right? Tell me, am I Eric the Eye?"

Mutters, mumbles and moans. The man seemed beyond intelligibility.

"What about Franklin? He can't do this to us, can he, Uncle Thomas? Don't you want to escape? Don't you want revenge on Franklin, on Ottilie, for what they did to your wives? Don't you? *Don't you?*"

He had to cut through his uncle's confused mist of gathering delirium.

In complete desperation, he lowered his head and sank his teeth into a wounded shoulder.

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NOTHING. Just the steady flow of argumentative gibberish. And the thin blood dripping from the mouth.

"I saw Arthur the Organizer. He said he'd known you for a long time. When did you meet him, Uncle Thomas? When did you first meet Arthur the Organizer?"

The head drooped lower, the shoulders slumped further forward.

"Tell me about Alien-science. What is Alien-science?" Eric was almost gibbering himself now in his frantic efforts to find a key that would unlock his uncle's mind. "Are Arthur the Organizer and Walter the Weapon-Seeker very important men among the Alien-sciencers? Are they the chiefs? What was the name of the structure they were hiding in? What is it to the Monsters? They talked about other tribes, tribes I never heard of. How many other tribes are there? Are these other tribes —"

That was it. He had found the key. He had gotten through.

Thomas the Trap-Smasher's head came up waveringly, dimness swirling in his eyes. "Other tribes. Funny that you should ask about other tribes. That *you* should ask."

"Why? What about them?" Eric fought to hold the key in place, to keep it turning. "Why shouldn't I ask about those other tribes?"

"Your grandmother was from another tribe, a real strange tribe in a faroff burrow. I remember hearing about it when I was a little boy." Thomas the Trap-Smasher nodded to himself. "Your grandfather's band went on a long journey, the longest they'd ever taken. And they caught your grandmother and brought her back."

"My grandmother?" For the moment, Eric forgot what was being prepared for him outside. He'd known there was some peculiar secret about his grandmother. She had rarely been mentioned in Mankind. Up to now, he'd taken it for granted that this was because she'd had a son who was terribly unlucky — almost the worst thing a person in the burrows could be. A one-child litter, after all, and being killed together with his wife in Monster territory. Very unlucky.

"MY grandmother was from another tribe? Not from Mankind?" He knew, of course, that several of the women had been captured from other peoples in neighboring burrows and had the good fortune now to be considered full-fledged members of Mankind. Sometimes one of their own women would be lost this way, when she strayed too far

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down an outlying burrow and stumbled into a band of Stranger warriors. If you stole a woman from another people, after all, you stole a substantial portion of their knowledge. But he'd never imagined —

"Dora the Dream-Singer." Thomas's head waggled loosely: he dribbled words mixed with red saliva. "Did you know why your grandmother was called the Dream-Singer, Eric? The women used to say that the things she talked about happened only in dreams, and that she couldn't talk straight like other people — she could only sing about her dreams. But she taught your father a lot, and he was like her. Women were a little afraid to mate with him. My sister was the first to take a chance — and everyone said she deserved what she got."

Abruptly, Eric became conscious of a change in the sounds outside the burrow. More quiet. Were they coming for him now?

"Uncle Thomas, listen! I have an idea. Those Strangers — Walter, Arthur the Organizer — they gave me a Monster souvenir. I don't know what it does, but I can't get at it. I'll turn around. You try to reach down into my knapsack with the tips of your fingers and —"

The Trap-Smasher paid no attention to him. "She was an Alien-sciencer," he rambled on, mostly to himself. "Your grandmother was the first Alien-sciencer we ever had in Mankind. I guess her tribe were all Alien-sciencers. Imagine — a whole tribe of Alien-sciencers!"

Eric groaned. This half-alive, delirious man was his only hope of escaping. This bloody wreck who had once been the proudest, most alert band captain of them all.

He turned for another look at the guard. The man was still staring down the length of the great central burrow. There was nothing to be heard now but a terrifying silence, as if dozens of pairs of eyes were glowing in anticipation. And footsteps — were not those footsteps? He had to find a way to make his uncle cooperate.

"THOMAS the Trap-Smasher!" he said sharply, barely managing to keep his voice low. "Listen to me. This is an order! There's something in my knapsack, a blob of sticky stuff. We're going to turn our backs to each other, and you're going to reach in with your fingers and fish it out. Do you hear me? That's an order — a warrior's order!"

His uncle nodded, completely docile. "I've been a warrior for over twenty auld lang synes," he mumbled, twisting around. "Six

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of them a band captain. I've given orders and taken them, given them and taken them. I've never disobeyed an order. What I always say is how can you expect to give orders if you don't —"

"*Now,*" Eric told him, bringing their backs together and hunching down so that his knapsack would be just under his uncle's bound arms. "Reach in. Work that mass of sticky stuff out. It's right on top. And hurry!"

Yes. Those were footsteps coming up outside. Several of them. The leaders of the Female Society, the chief, an escort of warriors. And the guard, watching that deadly procession, was liable to remember his duties and turn back to the prisoners.

"*Hurry,*" he demanded. "I told you to hurry, dammit! That's an order, too. Get it out fast. Fast!"

And, all this time, as the Trap-Smasher's fumbling fingers wandered about in his knapsack, as he listened with fright and impatience to the sounds of the approaching execution party — all this time, somewhere in his mind, there was wonderment at the orders he was rapping out to an experienced band captain and the incredible authority he had managed to get into his voice.

"Now you're wondering where your grandmother's tribe have their burrow," Thomas began suddenly, reverting to an earlier topic as if they were having a pleasant conversation after a fine, full meal.

"Forget it! Get that stuff out. Just get it out!"

"It's hard to describe," the other man's voice wandered on. "A long way off, their burrow is, a long way off. You know the Strangers call us front-burrow people. You know that, don't you? The Strangers are back-burrowers. Well, your grandmother's people are the bottom-most burrowers of all."

Eric sensed his fingers closing in the knapsack.

The three women who ruled the Female Society came into the storage burrow. Ottilie the Omen-Teller, Sarah the Sickness-Healer and Rita the Record-Keeper. With them was the chief and two band captains, heavily armed.

IX

OTTILIE, the Chieftain's First Wife, was in the lead. She stopped, just inside the entrance to the burrow and the others came to a halt around her.

"Look at them," she jeered. "They're trying to free each other! And what do they plan to do if they get themselves untied?"

Franklin moved to her side and took a long, judicious look at the two men squatting back to back. "They'll try to escape," he ex-

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plained, continuing his wife's joke. "They'll have their hands free, they figure, and surely Thomas the Trap-Smasher and his nephew are a match, even bare-handed, for the best spearmen in Mankind!"

And then Eric felt the searching hands come up out of the knapsack to which his own arms were tied. Something fell to the floor of the burrow. It made an odd noise, halfway between a splash and a thud. He twisted around for it immediately with his mouth open, flexing his knees in a tight crouch underneath his body.

"You've never seen anything like the burrows of your grandmother's people," his uncle was mumbling, as if what his hands had just done was no concern of the rest of him. "And neither have I, though I've listened to the tales."

"He won't last long now," Sarah the Sickness-Healer commented. "We'll have to have our fun with the boy."

All you do, Walter the Weapon-Seeker had said, *is tear off a pinch with your fingers. Then spit on it and throw it. Throw it as fast and as far as you can.*

He couldn't use his fingers. But he leaned down to the red blob and nipped off a piece with his teeth. He brought his tongue against the strange soft substance, lashing saliva into it. And simultaneously he kicked at the burrow floor with curved toes, straightening his legs, jerking his thighs and body upward. Unable to use his arms for balance, he tottered erect and turned, swaying, to face the leaders of his people.

After you spit on it, throw it fast. As fast and as far as you can.

"I don't know what he's doing," someone said, "but I don't like it. Let me through."

Stephen the Strong-Armed stepped ahead of the group and lifted a heavy spear, ready for throwing.

Eric shut his eyes, bent his head far back on his neck and took a deep, deep breath. Then he snapped his head forward, flipping his tongue hard against the object in his mouth. He forced out his breath so abruptly that the exhalation became a wild, barking cough.

The soft little mass flew out of his mouth, and he opened his eyes to watch its course. For a moment, he was unable to find it anywhere; then he located it by the odd expression on Stephen's face and the fearful upward roll of his eyes.

There was a little red splotch in the middle of the band captain's forehead.

What was supposed to happen, he wondered? He had followed

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directions as well as he could under the circumstances, but he had no idea what the scarlet stain, made loose and moist by his saliva, was supposed to accomplish. He watched it, hoping and waiting.

Then Stephen the Strong-Armed brought his free hand up slowly to wipe the stuff off. Eric stopped hoping. Nothing was going to happen.

Strangers, he had begun to think despairingly, *that's what comes of trusting Strangers* —

THE blast of sound was so tremendous that for a moment he thought the roof of the burrow had fallen in. He was slammed backwards against the wall and fell as if he'd been walloped with a spear haft. He remembered the cough with which he'd expelled the bit of red blob from his mouth. Had there been a delayed echo to his cough, a gigantic, ear-splitting echo?

He lifted his head from the floor finally, when the reverberations in the little storage burrow had rumbled into a comparative silence. Someone was screaming. Someone was screaming over and over again.

It was Sarah. She was looking at Stephen the Strong-Armed from the rear. She had been standing directly behind him. Now she was staring at him and screaming in sharp steady bursts.

Her mouth was open so wide that it seemed she was about to tear her jaws apart. And with each scream she lifted her arm rigidly and pointed to the back of Stephen's neck. She kept lifting her arm and pointing as if she wanted everyone present to know beyond the least doubt why and how she came to be screaming.

Stephen the Strong-Armed had no head. His body ended at the neck, and flaps of skin fell down to his chest in an irregular wavy pattern. A fountain of blood bubbled and spurted where his head had been. His body still stood upright, feet planted wide apart in a good warrior's stance, one arm holding the spear ready for action and the other congealed in its upward motion to wipe the red blob away. It stood, incredibly straight and tall and alive.

Suddenly, it fell apart.

First the spear slid slowly forward out of the right hand and clattered to the floor. Then the arms began to fall loosely to the sagging knees and the entire great, brawny body slumped as if its bones had left it. It dropped aimlessly to the floor, an arm poking out here, a leg twisting out there, in a pattern as meaningless as if an oddly shaped bag of skin had been flung to one side of the burrow.

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It continued to twitch for a moment or two, as the bubbling fountain of blood turned into a sluggishly flowing river. At last it lay still, a motionless heap of limbs and torso. Of the missing head there was no trace anywhere.

SARAH the Sickness - Healer stopped screaming and turned, shaking, to her companions. Their protruding eyes left the body on the floor.

Then they all reacted at once. They yelled madly, wildly, fearfully, as if they were a chorus and she the conductor. Still bellowing, they made for the narrow entrance behind them. They got through in a pushing, punching scramble that at one point looked like a composite monster with dozens of arms, legs and swinging, naked breasts. They carried the guard outside with them, and with them, too, they carried their uncontrollable panic, screaming it into existence all along the great central burrow.

For a little while, Eric could hear feet pounding into the distant corridors. Then there was quiet. There was quiet everywhere, except for Thomas the Trap - Smasher's interminable mumbling.

Eric forced himself upright again. He was unable to imagine what had happened. That red blob — the Stranger, Walter, had said it was a weapon, but it didn't operate like any weapon he had ever in his life heard of. Except possibly in the times of the ancestors: the ancestors were supposed to have had things which could blow an object apart and leave no trace. But this was an alien artifact, a possession of the Monsters which Walter the Weapon - Seeker had somehow found and appropriated. What was it? How had it exploded the head of Stephen the Strong-Armed?

That was to be worked out another time. Meanwhile, he had his chance. It might not last long: he had no idea when the panic might subside and a patrol of warriors be sent back to investigate. He stepped carefully across the red stream flowing from the fallen man's neck. Squatting down in front of the dropped spear, he managed to get a grip on it with his bound hands and rose, holding it awkwardly behind him.

No time to cut his bonds. Not here.

"Uncle Thomas," he called. "We can get away. We have a chance now. Come on, get up!"

The wounded band captain stared up at him without comprehension. "— corridors like you've never seen or imagined," he continued in a low monotone. "Glow lamps that aren't on foreheads.

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Corridors filled with glow lamps. Corridors and corridors and corridors —"

For a moment, Eric considered. The man would be a heavy liability in fast travel. But he couldn't desert him. This was his last surviving relative, the only person who didn't consider him an outlaw and a thing. And, shattered as he was, also still his captain.

"Get up!" he said again. "Thomas the Trap-Smasher, get up! That's an order, a warrior's order. Get up!"

As he'd hoped, his uncle responded to the old command. He managed to get his legs under his body, and strained against them, but it was no use. He didn't have the energy to rise.

CASTING apprehensive looks over his shoulder at the entrance to the storage burrow, Eric ran to the struggling man. Working backwards, he managed to get one end of the spear under the crook of his uncle's arm. Then, using his own hip as a fulcrum, he levered hard at the other end.

It was painful, slippery work, since he couldn't bring all of his muscles into play and it was difficult to see what he was doing. In between efforts, he gasped out orders to "Get up, get up, get *up*, damn you!" At last the end of the spear went all the way down. His uncle was on his feet, staggering, but at least on his feet.

Dragging the spear awkwardly, Eric urged and butted him out of the place. The great central burrow was empty of people. Weapons, pots and miscellaneous possessions lay strewn about where they had been dropped. The finished structure of the Stage stood deserted in front of the royal mound. And some time before, the bodies of his uncle's wives had evidently been removed.

The chief and the other leaders had bolted to the left once they had clawed their way out of the storage burrow. They had apparently run past the scaffold structure and picked up the rest of Mankind in their panic.

Eric turned right.

His uncle was a problem. Thomas the Trap-Smasher kept coming to a bewildered halt. Again and again he began the story of his long-ago journey to the burrows of the strange, distant tribe. Eric had to push against him to keep him moving.

Once they were in the outlying corridors, he felt better. But not until they had made many turns, passed dozens of branches and were well into completely uninhabited burrows, did he feel he could stop and saw himself free of his bonds on the point of the spear. He did the same for his

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uncle. Then, throwing the Trap-Smasher's left arm across his own shoulders and clutching him tightly about the waist, he started off again. It was slow going: his uncle was a heavy man, but the more distance they could put between themselves and Mankind, the better.

But distance where? Where should they go? He pondered the problem as they tottered together down the silent, branching corridors. One place was as good as another. There was nowhere that they would be welcome. Just keep going.

He may have muttered his questions aloud. To his surprise, Thomas the Trap-Smasher suddenly said in an entirely coherent but very weak voice: "The doorway to Monster territory, Eric. Make for the doorway to Monster territory where you went to make your Theft."

"Why?" Eric asked. "What can we do there?"

There was no answer. His uncle's head fell forward on his chest. He was evidently sliding into a stupor again. And yet, somehow, as long as Eric's encircling arm pulled at his body, the man's legs kept moving forward. There was some residual stamina and a warrior's determination in him yet.

Monster territory. Was there more safety for them there now than they could find among human beings?

Very well then. The doorway to Monster territory. They would have to come around in a wide arc through many corridors to get to it, but Eric knew the way. He was Eric the Eye, after all, he told himself: it was his business always to know the way.

But was it? He had not enjoyed the formal initiation into manhood that was the usual aftermath of a successful Theft. Without that, perhaps he was still Eric the Only, still a boy and an initiate. No, he knew what he was. He was Eric the Outlaw, nothing else.

He was an outlaw, without a home and a people. And, except for the dying man he pulled along, everyone's hand was henceforth against him.

X

THOMAS the Trap-Smasher had been badly injured in the surprise attack that had wiped out his band. Ordinarily, he would have had his wounds carefully dressed by the cleverness and accumulated experience of Sarah the Sickness-Healer. Under the circumstances, however, Sarah had done the reverse.

Now, the strain of escape and the forced headlong flight that followed it had emptied his body

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of its last resources. His eyes were glazed and his strong shoulders hung slack. He was a somnambulist walking jerkily in the direction of death.

When they stopped to rest, Eric — after listening intently for any sounds of pursuit — had washed his uncle's wounds carefully with water from the canteens and had bound the uglier gashes with strips torn from a knapsack. It was all he knew how to do: warrior's first aid. A woman's advanced therapeutic knowledge was needed for anything more complicated.

Not that it would have made very much difference by this time. The Trap-Smasher was too far gone.

Eric felt desperate at the thought of being left alone forever in the dark, uninhabited corridors. He tried to force water and bits of food upon his uncle. The man's head rolled back, nourishment dribbling carelessly down from both sides of his mouth. He was breathing lightly and very rapidly. His body had grown quite warm by the time they stopped.

Eric himself ate ravenously: it was his first meal in a long, long while. He kept staring at his recumbent uncle and trying to work out a line of action that would do some good. In the end, he had thought of nothing better than to hitch the man's arm up over his shoulder again and to keep going in the direction of Monster territory.

Once erect, the Trap-Smasher's feet began walking again, but with a dragging, soggy quality that became more and more pronounced. After a while, Eric had to come to a halt: he had the feeling that he was hauling dead weight.

When he tried to lower his uncle to the floor of the burrow, he found that the body had become almost completely limp. Thomas lay on his back, his eyes staring without curiosity at the rounded ceiling upon which his forehead glow-lamp outlined a bright circular patch.

The heartbeat was very, very faint.

"Eric," he heard a weak voice say. He raised his eyes from his uncle's chest and looked at the painfully working mouth.

"Yes, uncle?"

"I'm sorry — about — what I got you into. I had — no right. Your life — after all — your life. You — my wives — the band. I led — death — everyone. I'm sorry."

Eric fought hard to hold back his tears. "It was for a reason, Uncle Thomas," he said. "We had a cause. It wasn't just you. The cause failed."

There was a hideous cackle

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from the prone man. For a moment, Eric thought it was a death rattle. Then he realized that it had been a laugh, but such a laugh as he had never heard before.

"A cause?" the Trap-Smasher gasped. "A cause? Do you know — do you — know what — the cause was? I wanted — wanted to be chief. Chief. The only — only way I could — do it — Alien-science — the Strangers — a cause. Everyone — the killings — I wanted to — to be chief. *Chief!*"

He went rigid as he coughed out the last word. Then slowly, like flesh turning into liquid, he relaxed.

He was dead.

ERIC stared at the body a long time. It didn't make any difference, he found. The numbness in his mind remained. There was a great paralyzed spot in the center of his brain that was unable to think or to feel.

In the end, he shook himself, bent down and grabbed the body by the shoulders. Walking backwards, he dragged it in the direction of Monster territory.

Something he had to do. The duty of anyone who lived in the burrows when death occurred in his neighborhood. Now it filled time and used up energies that he might otherwise have expended in thoughts which were agonizing.

The energies which it demanded were almost more than he was capable of at this point. His uncle had been a heavy, well built man. Eric found that he had to stop at the end of almost every curving corridor and get his breath back.

He finally arrived at the doorway, grateful for the fact that his uncle had died so relatively close to it. He also felt he understood why this had been suggested as their destination. Thomas the Trap-Smasher had known he had little time left. His nephew would have the responsibility of sewering him. He had tried to make it as easy for Eric as possible by going the greater part of the distance on his own feet.

There was a fresh-water pipe in the wall near the doorway to Monster territory. And wherever there was a fresh-water pipe, the Monsters were likely to have laid a sewer pipe nearby. It was down this, probably, that the men killed in the battle with Stephen the Strong-Armed's band had been disposed of much earlier. And it was down this that Thomas had known his remains must also go — the closest point at which his nephew could sewer him in comparative safety.

This much, at least, he had done for Eric's benefit.

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Eric located the fresh-water pipe without much difficulty. There was a constant low rumbling and gurgling underfoot, and — at the spot where it was most pronounced—he found the slab in the floor cut at the cost of infinite labor by some past generation of Mankind. Near it, after the slab was lifted, was another, much thicker pipe, large enough to carry two men abreast. Like the other one, the hard stuff of the burrow floor had been scraped away so that a joint lay exposed.

Opening the joint was another matter. Eric had seen it done many times by his elders, but this was his own first attempt. It was a tricky business of tugging a heavy covering plate first right, then left, and getting his fingers under the rim and pulling at just the right moment.

THE joint opened at last, and the incredible stink of Monster sewage poured out as the liquid swirled darkly by. Death had always been associated in Eric's mind with this stink, since the pipe carried not only the Monster's waste matter but also that of Mankind, collected from its burrows every week by the old women who were too feeble for any other work. All that was not alive or useful was carried to the nearest Monster sewer pipe, all that might decay and foul the burrows. And that included, of course, the bodies of the dead.

Eric stripped his uncle's body of all useful gear as he had seen the women do many times. Then he dragged it to the hole in the burrow floor and held it by one arm for a moment as the current of the sewage caught it. He repeated as much of the ceremony as he could remember, concluding with the words: *"And therefore, O ancestors, I beg you to receive the body of this member of Mankind, Thomas the Trap-Smasher, a warrior of the first rank, a band captain of renown and the father of nine."*

There was usually another line or so — *"Take him to you and keep him with you until the time when the Monsters have been destroyed utterly and the Earth is ours again. Then shall you and he and all human beings who have ever lived rise from the sewers and joyously walk the surface of our world forever."* But this, after all, was a pure Ancestor-science passage; and his uncle had died fighting Ancestor-science. What was the Alien-science equivalent? And it likely to be any more potent, any less full of falsehood? In the end, Eric omitted those last two lines.

He let go of the stiffening arm. The body shot away and down the pipe. Thomas the Trap-Smasher was gone, he was gone

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for all time, the way Eric reasoned now. He was dead and sewered, and that was that.

Eric closed the joint, pulled the slab down and stamped it into place.

He was completely alone. An outlaw who could expect nothing from other human beings but death by slow torture. He had no companions, no home, no beliefs of any sort. His uncle's last words still lay, in all their stern ugliness, at the bottom of his mind. *"I wanted to — to be chief."*

IT was bad enough to discover that the religion on which he had been raised was a mere prop to the power of the chieftainship, that the mysterious Female Society was completely unable to see into a person's future. But to find out that his uncle's thoughtful antagonism to such nonsense was based on nothing more substantial than simple personal ambition, an ambition murderously unscrupulous and willing to sacrifice anybody who trusted him — well, what was there left to believe in, to base a life upon?

Had his father and mother been any less gullible than the most naive child in the burrows? They had sacrificed themselves — for what? For one superstition as opposed to another, for the secret political maneuvers of this person as opposed to that.

Not for him. He would be free. He laughed, bitterly and self-consciously. He had to be free. There was no choice: he was an outlaw.

Eric walked a few steps and put his hands on the door to Monster territory. To shift it out of its socket was a hard job for one man. He strained and tore his fingers; finally he managed it. The door came away and he deposited it carefully on the floor of the burrow.

He stared at it for a while, trying to figure out a way of getting it back after he'd passed through the doorway. No, a single man just couldn't do that from the other side. He'd have to leave the doorway open, an incredible social crime.

Well, he couldn't commit a crime any more. He was beyond all rules made by human communities. Ahead lay the glaring white light that he and his kind feared so much. Into this he would go. Here, where there were no illusions to be found and no help to be expected, here he would make his solitary outlaw home.

Behind him lay the dark, safe, intricate burrows. They were tunnels, Eric knew now, in the walls that surrounded Monster territory. Men lived in these walls, and shivered, and were ignorant, and made fools of each

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other. He could no longer do these things: he had to face the Monsters. He wanted to face them and destroy them.

It was like one of the roaches in the storage burrow declaring war on a cook who came in to make the evening meal for Mankind. The cook would roar with laughter at such a thought. Who knew what went on in the mind of a roach — and who cared? Yet the roach would enjoy two special advantages. He had once and for all stopped crawling greedily and aimlessly with his own kind; and the enemy he had selected could regard him with nothing more than heavy oblivious contempt. If he could ever for a moment find one usable weapon and one vital area on which that weapon could be used . . .

He hefted his two special advantages grimly. Then Eric the Only, the Eye, the Outlaw, Eric the Self-Aware Individual Man, stepped through the doorway into Monster territory.

— WILLIAM TENN

★★★★★

FORECAST

Last summer we printed what we said was going to be one of the best-liked science-fiction stories of the year — Jack Vance's *The Dragon Masters* — and, by gosh, we were right; your letters were enthusiastic, and both the story and the fine Gaughan illustrations that went with it went right on to pick up best-of-the-year nominations.

Next issue Vance is back with a big one called *The Star King*. In *The Dragon Masters* Vance had one world under observation; here he shows us the baroque and fascinating life of a galaxy, bright with imaginative color, brilliant with invention. You'll like this one, too!

In the same issue a complete short novel by Fritz Leiber, *No Great Magic*, and as much more as the type will contain. Which will be somewhat more than heretofore, by the way. Next issue will show a slight change in format — same overall size, same number of pages, same price, but a different method of printing and a slightly more compact type — which will make it a bigger bargain than ever. (As you know, Galaxy already contains both more pages and more actual words of science fiction per issue than any other magazine in the world.) We'll tell you one thing for sure: this issue you won't want to miss!

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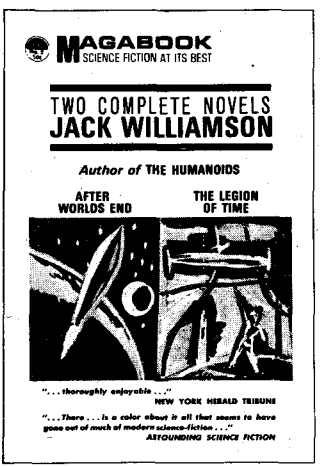
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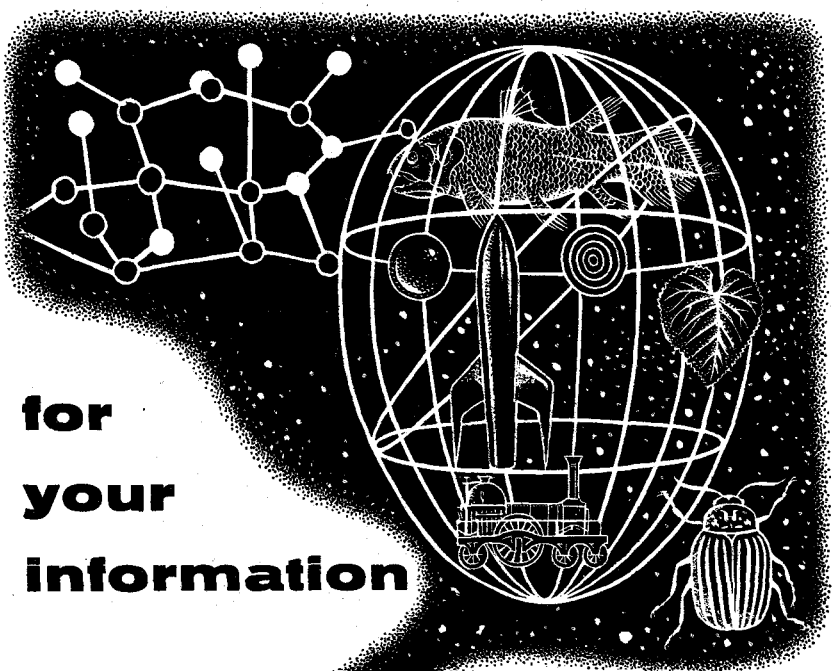

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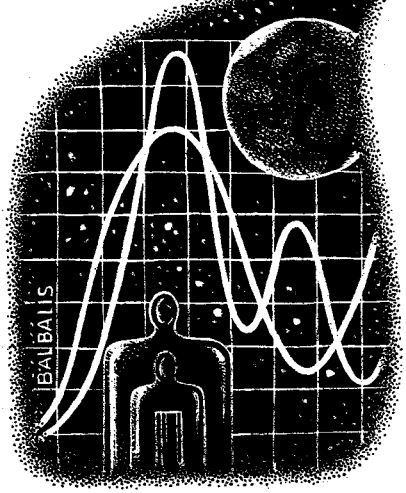

KING OF THE RATS

FOR those who know Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Ballet* only from records and have never seen it staged it may be necessary to explain that there is a Mouse King on stage. It has many heads — mouse-heads, of course — and for that reason it doesn't have much to do. But the choreographer's problems are beside the point here, as is the fact that the ballet is based on a French rewrite of a story by

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E. T. A. Hoffmann, he of the *Tales of Hoffmann.*

What is to the point is that the Mouse King of the ballet was a Rat King in the original story, and that there is a little known fact of Natural History hiding behind the fantasy.

Quite a number of years ago, at a Christmas party where the hostess told me that she had taken her children to see the ballet, I tried to tell that fact, but was interrupted with the remark that this was "not a nice story." I just found out that Richard Lydekker, who edited the multi-volume *Library of Natural History* which was published in New York in 1902, also did not consider it a "nice story", for while he followed his original, Dr. Alfred Brehm's *Tierleben,* quite faithfully, he left out the three pages of the original which deal with the Rat King.

A Rat King is not a separate species. One is tempted to say "on the contrary," for it consists of a number of rats which cannot be separated.

The average number of rats forming a "king" is twelve, but larger and smaller numbers have been found. The tails of the animals are intertwined in such a manner that the individuals cannot pull free. The whole thing is about two feet in diameter. All the heads point outward, naturally, since the tails are stuck together. Being handicapped in this manner, the animals are not very mobile and in a few cases a dead and dried-out "king" has been found. Evidently the rats had starved to death. But in the majority of the cases the "king" when found was still alive. It often was found because the members composing it were squealing with hunger.

A NUMBER of writers have dismissed the Rat King as "legendary" but that seems to be due to a confusion, just as the term Rat King itself is somewhat confused — as I'll explain shortly. There is a European legend about a "king of the rats" which is old enough to be untraceable because its roots disappear in the time before printing. But the name was known to Konrad Gesner, the great Swiss zoologist of the sixteenth century. In his book on the four-footed animals, which was printed for the first time in 1555, he said in his chapter on the rat — after remarking that rats do not need to be described because "to many they are better known than is pleasing" — that "some say that the rat, in its old age, grows enormously large [so that it can no longer move around] and is fed by the younger rats; it is called a Rat King by our people."

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This is a reference to the legend which other writers expanded, saying that the younger rats steal red cloth to drape on their king. Many a young Swiss probably gripped his stick more tightly when opening the door of a long unused barn or basement. There might be an enormous rat inside, immobile because of age and size, maybe, but still equipped with long teeth and possibly defended by faithful retainers. Of course no rat king of that kind was ever found, though it made fine material for fairy tales. But once in a while peasant lads would find the nearly immobile assembly of rats with their tails stuck together. Was that the rat king's throne? Or did the king of the rats look different from the fairy tales? In the end linguistic usage decided that it was the Rat King.

Two types of rats were common in Europe. In England they are distinguished simply by the color of their fur as Black and Brown rats. The latter goes under the name of Norway Rat in some books. Zoologists know that the, incidentally larger, brown rat is a fairly late immigrant to Europe. The same is believed of the black rat, but the date of immigration was early. The first mention of the black rat can be found in the works of Albert of Bollstädt, better known as Albertus Magnus, who died in 1280. Whether they arrived, presumably from the East, a century or five centuries before Albertus is something nobody knows.

But the arrival of the brown rat has even been observed. The German physician Peter Simon Pallas, who explored Russia for the Court in St. Petersburg, reported that large numbers of brown rats could be seen traveling westward after an earthquake in the area of the Caspian Sea. The date was early autumn of 1727. The brown rat appeared in East Prussia in 1750, in Paris in 1753, in South Germany in 1780 and in Switzerland in 1809. But in the meantime brown rats from the East Indies had reached England by ship in 1732 and had traveled from England to the United States in 1755. The brown rat is considerably larger than the black rat, and more destructive in the same ratio. It was only a minor consolation that the first victims of the brown rat's appetite were usually the black rats.

AROUND the year 1850, the inhabitants of Denmark, Germany and Switzerland still referred to the two rats as "basement rats" and "attic rats", the smaller black rat (*Mus rattus*) preferring the roof area, while the larger brown rat (*Mus decumanus*) preferred the basements. By

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the end of the nineteenth century the brown rat had won out. The black rat had become rare. And the Reverend J. G. Wood, who near the end of the nineteenth century wrote a book called *Animate Creation,* was more than slightly wrong in writing that the "conquest had been brought about not by war but by love", thinking that in interbreeding the characteristics of the brown rat had become dominant. It had been war, plain and simple.

This excursion into the history of the two kinds of rats has been necessary for a specific reason. Whatever it is that causes a dozen or so rats to become a Rat King affects the black rat only, as far as we can tell from old descriptions. It does not seem to touch the brown rat. And since the black rat has become comparatively rare the chances for forming Rat Kings have diminished too. This must be the reason why there are no recent reports.

But since the majority of these reports are old how can we know that they are true?

This is in itself a very valid suggestion. But fortunately we have the documents of the equivalent of a law suit involving a Rat King.

On January 17, 1774, a young man came to the district office of the government of the king of Saxony in Leipzig with a complaint. His name, he stated, was Christian Kaiser and he was employed as a helper at the windmill at Lindenau, a hamlet within walking distance from Leipzig. A week earlier he had found a live Rat King consisting of 16 rats whose tails were intertwined. He had shown it to his master, the miller Tobias Jaeger. The reason why he bothered the officials was to complain about one Johann Adam Fasshauer, a resident of Lindenau. Said Johann Adam Fasshauer had gone to the aforementioned miller Tobias Jaeger and persuaded him to hand over the Rat King to said Fasshauer because he wished to make a painting of it. But in reality Fasshauer had exhibited the Rat King, charging admission, and petitioner was now petitioning the officials to force said Fasshauer to return the Rat King, to hand over the money he had earned by its public exhibition and also to pay the expenses for the action of the officials.

Before committing themselves on the legal steps to be taken the officials made sure that there was a Rat King.

They first questioned Christian Kaiser under oath about details of the capture. He told that he was working in the mill on January 12, 1774, when he heard a noise near a staircase and saw several

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rats looking out at him. Taking a piece of firewood, he killed them, and then took a ladder to see whether there might be more rats on a ledge, this time taking an axe as a weapon. There he found the Rat King. He pulled it off the ledge, using the axe so that it fell to the floor. He counted sixteen rats, fifteen of them with their tails "plaited together" and the sixteenth sticking to the back fur of one of the fifteen. Most of them survived the fall from the ledge and stayed alive for some time. But though they attempted to pull free of each other they did not succeed.

THE NEXT step of the officials was to send a doctor to Lindenau. Then the doctor wrote a protocol, saying that he had arrived in Lindenau and had been led to a room in the Posthorn Inn where he had found a Rat King consisting of sixteen dead rats.

"Fifteen of them," the doctor wrote, "had their tails knotted together into a large knot in such a manner that most tails were completely in the knot except for a piece one or two inches in length near their bodies." He then examined the rats in detail, and summarized the result of his examination in the following four points:

"(1) that the bodies, heads and feet of the rats had their natural shapes,

"(2) that some of them had the color of gray ashes, some were a little darker and some almost black,

"(3) that they measured more than a span in length [this must refer to the length of the head and body without the tail; the normal figure for a black rat is about seven inches],

"(4) that the proportions of their thickness to their length indicated that they were undernourished rather than well nourished."

His conclusion was that "said sixteen rats were not one organism which is called a Rat King but sixteen individual rats of different size and coloration and (in my opinion) different age and sex." As for the reason, he pointed out that there had been a cold spell prior to the discovery. He thought that the rats had huddled together for warmth but that the urine of other rats hiding at a higher level had dripped down on the interwined tails and had frozen.

I am sorry that I can't report whether the officials decided that Johann Adam Fasshauer had to return the Rat King to Christian Kaiser along with the money he had earned by its exhibition. Since my source is a zoological book, the legal consequences have

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been neglected, but the point is that after all these legalities and investigations the authenticity of the fact involved cannot easily be doubted. The good doctor's explanation of how the Rat King came into being is admittedly weak, but we still don't know what the actual reason is. Some later investigators have offered the guess that it might be the result of a disease of some kind which is peculiar to the black rat.

AT ANY event, the Rat King of Lindenau was not unique. During December, 1822, two Rat Kings were found by three farm hands engaged in threshing grain in the barn of the local forester. The place was the hamlet of Döllstedt, not quite ten miles from the city of Gotha. While doing their work, the men heard the squealing of rats and started a search, aided by the forester's helper. They finally found that one of the main cross beams had a six-inch-deep hollow in its topside, evidently one that the rats had gnawed. They saw that this hollow was full of rats, and they were somewhat surprised that the rats made no attempt to run away.

The men pushed the rats out, and saw that one was a Rat King of 28 rats and the other one, one of 14 rats. Both sets were described as consisting of fully grown rats, quite clean but also very hungry. Strangely enough they are also described as having been very docile, which probably means that the rats were in an advanced state of weakness from hunger.

After the whole village had marveled at the find, the public spectacle ended by the execution of both Rat Kings, the execution being carried out with the flails. Then two of the men took pitchforks and tried to pry the bodies of the smaller assembly apart. After much effort they succeeded in pulling out a few of the rats. The forester himself looked at them and wrote down that the tails had not been torn off in the process and even had their skin, but they "showed the impressions of the other tails, just like leather straps that had been plaited together for a long time."

A later case has the advantage of having been examined by a man with scientific knowledge. The Rat King was found on February 2, 1880 by a drayman in a room of the abattoir of the city of Düsseldorf. It was a room which was used for the storage of skins and which was, for this reason, not much frequented by people. The Rat King consisted of eight black rats, of which one was killed when it was discovered. The other seven lived for some time. A Mr. Wilhelm Deckers ac-

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quired it and went to a taxidermist to have it preserved. The taxidermist, naturally, cleaned it up so that one cannot tell whether the intertwined tails were also held together by anything that might act like glue.

After Mr. Deckers died, the specimen was donated to the local High School and examined by the school's science teacher, Prof. Ahrend. Ahrend wrote that "Guntermann [the taxidermist] had cleaned the tails of the animals carefully so that only their intertwined positions were preserved . . . but just looking at the intertwined tails makes it clear that even the smallest amount of a sticky substance would render the animals inseparable."

The latest case which I could find in a quick survey was reported by the German zoologist Dr. Ludwig Heck, who later became the director of the Zoological Garden in Berlin. It refers to a Rat King found in January, 1907, in the village of Capelle, near Hamm in Westphalia. The local pastor, Wigger by name, informed the zoologist Reeker, who tried to acquire it for the Provincial Museum of Westphalia. But before Reeker could move, the Zoological Institute of the University of Göttingen had secured it for its own collection.

It consisted of ten specimens of the black rat. The director of the Zoological Institute, Privy Councillor Ehlers, wrote to Dr. Heck in reply to a question that he could not explain how such a thing could have happened and that the rat's tails do not show any visible pathological changes. And he added that the Institute's taxidermist considered it impossible that this Rat King might have been made by some pranksters.

Well, this is the story.

All the cases have two things in common. It is always the black *Mus rattus* which produces a Rat King, and they have all been found during the coldest time of the year, in weather which would make the animals huddle together for warmth.

— WILLY LEY

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ON THE GEM PLANET

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By CORDWAINER SMITH

Illustrated by WOOD

He sought help and a great gift of weaponry. What he found—but could not keep—was love!

CONSIDER the horse. He climbed up through the crevasses of a cliff of gems; the force which drove him was the love of man.

Consider Mizzer, the resort planet, where the dictator Colonel Wedder reformed the culture so violently that whatever had been slovenly now became atrocious.

Consider Genevieve, so rich that she was the prisoner of her own wealth, so beautiful that she was the victim of her own beauty, so intelligent that she knew there was nothing, nothing to be done about her fate.

Consider Casher O'Neill, a wanderer among the planets, thirsting for justice and yet hoping in his innermost thoughts that "justice" was not just another word for revenge.

Consider Pontoppidan, that literal gem of a planet, where the people were too rich and busy to have good food, open air or much fun. All they had was diamonds, rubies, tourmalines and emeralds.

Add these together and you have one of the strangest stories ever told from world to world.

I

WHEN Casher O'Neill came to Pontoppidan, he found that the capital city was appropriately called Andersen.

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This was the second century of the Rediscovery of Man. People everywhere had taken up old names, old languages, old customs, as fast as the robots and the underpeople could retrieve the data from the rubbish of forgotten starlanes or the subsurface ruins of Manhome itself.

Casher knew this very well, to his bitter cost. Re-acculturation had brought him revolution and exile. He came from the dry, beautiful planet of Mizzer. He was himself the nephew of the ruined ex-ruler, Kuraf, whose collection of objectionable books had at one time been unmatched in the settled galaxy; he had stood aside, half-assenting, when the colonels Gibna and Wedder took over the planet in the name of reform; he had implored the Instrumentality, vainly, for help when Wedder became a tyrant; and now he traveled among the stars, looking for men or weapons who might destroy Wedder and make Kaheer again the luxurious, happy city which it once had been.

He felt that his cause was hopeless when he landed on Pontoppidan. The people were warm-hearted, friendly, intelligent, but they had no motives to fight for, no weapons to fight with, no enemies to fight against. They had little public spirit, such as Casher O'Neill had seen back on his native planet of Mizzer. They were concerned about little things.

Indeed, at the time of his arrival, the Pontoppidans were wildly excited about a horse.

A horse! Who worries about one horse?

Casher O'Neill himself said so. "Why bother about a horse? We have lots of them on Mizzer. They are four-handed beings, eight times the weight of a man, with only one finger on each of the four hands. The fingernail is very heavy and permits them to run fast. That's why our people have them, for running."

"Why run?" said the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. "Why run, when you can fly? Don't you have ornithopters?"

"We don't run with them," said Casher indignantly. "We make them run against each other and then we pay prizes to the one which runs fastest."

"But then," said Phillip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator, "you get a very illogical situation. When you have tried out these four-fingered beings, you know how fast each one goes. So what? Why bother?"

His niece interrupted. She was a fragile little thing, smaller than Casher O'Neill liked women to be. She had clear gray eyes, well-marked eyebrows, a very artificial coiffeur of silver-blonde hair and the most sensitive little mouth he

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had ever seen. She conformed to the local fashion by wearing some kind of powder or face cream which was flesh-pink in color but which had overtones of lilac. On a woman as old as twenty-two, such a coloration would have made the wearer look like an old hag, but on Genevieve it was pleasant, if rather startling. It gave the effect of a happy child playing grown-up and doing the job joyfully and well. Casher knew that it was hard to tell ages in these off-trail planets. Genevieve might be a grand dame in her third or fourth rejuvenation.

He doubted it, on second glance. What she said was sensible, young, and pert:

"But uncle, they're *animals*!"

"I know that," he rumbled.

"But uncle, don't you see it?"

"Stop saying 'but uncle' and tell me what you mean," growled the Dictator, very fondly.

"Animals are always *uncertain*."

"Of course," said the uncle.

"That makes it a game, uncle," said Genevieve. "They're never sure that any one of them would do the same thing twice. Imagine the excitement — the beautiful big beings from earth running around and around on their four middle fingers, the big fingernails making the gems jump loose from the ground!"

"I'm not at all sure it's that way. Besides, Mizzer may be covered with something valuable, such as earth or sand, instead of gemstones like the ones we have here on Pontoppidan. You know your flower-pots with their rich, warm, wet, soft earth?"

"Of course I do, uncle. And I know what you paid for them. You were very generous. And still are," she added diplomatically, glancing quickly at Casher O'Neill to see how the familial piety went across with the visitor.

"We're not that rich on Mizzer. It's mostly sand, with farmland along the Twelve Niles, our big rivers."

"I've seen pictures of rivers," said Genevieve. "Imagine living on a whole world full of flowerpot stuff!"

"You're getting off the subject, darling. We were wondering why anyone would bring one horse, just one horse, to Pontoppidan. I suppose you could race a horse against himself, if you had a stopwatch. But would it be fun? Would you do that, young man?"

Casher O'Neill tried to be respectful. "In my home we used to have a lot of horses. I've seen my uncle time them one by one."

"Your uncle?" said the Dictator interestedly. "Who was your uncle that he had all these four-fingered 'horses' running around? They're all Earth animals and very expensive."

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CASHER felt the coming of the low, slow blow he had met so many times before, right from the whole outside world into the pit of his stomach. "My uncle —" he stammered — "my uncle — I thought you knew — was the old Dictator of Mizzer, Kuraf."

Philip Vincent jumped to his feet, very lightly for so well-fleshed a man. The young mistress, Genevieve, clutched at the throat of her dress.

"Kuraf!" cried the old Dictator. "Kuraf! We know about him, even here. But you were supposed to be a Mizzer patriot, not one of Kuraf's people."

"He doesn't have any children —" Casher began to explain.

"I should think not, not with those habits!" snapped the old man.

"— so I'm his nephew and his heir. But I'm not trying to put the Dictatorship back, even though I should be dictator. I just want to get rid of Colonel Wedder. He has ruined my people, and I am looking for money or weapons or help to make my home-world free." This was the point, Casher O'Neill knew, at which people either started believing him or did not. If they did not, there was not much he could do about it. If they did, he was sure to get some sympathy. So far, no help. Just sympathy.

But the Instrumentality, while refusing to take action against Colonel Wedder, had given young Casher O'Neill an all-world travel pass — something which a hundred lifetimes of savings could not have purchased for the ordinary man. (His obscene old uncle had gone off to Sunvale, on Ttiollé, the resort planet, to live out his years between the casino and the beach.) Casher O'Neill held the conscience of Mizzer in his hand. Only he, among the star travelers, cared enough to fight for the freedom of the Twelve Niles. Here, now, in this room, there was a turning point.

"I won't give you anything," said the Hereditary Dictator, but he said it in a friendly voice. His niece started tugging at his sleeve.

The older man went on. "Stop it, girl. I won't give you anything, not if you're part of that rotten lot of Kuraf's, not unless —"

"Anything, sir, anything, just so that I get help or weapons to go home to the Twelve Niles!"

"All right, then. Unless you open your mind to me. I'm a good telepath myself."

"Open my mind! Whatever for?" The incongruous indecency of it shocked Casher O'Neill. He'd had men and women and governments ask a lot of strange things from him, but no one before had had the cold impudence to ask him to open his mind. "And why you?" he went on, "What would

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you get out of it? There's nothing much in my mind."

"To make sure," said the Hereditary Dictator, "that you are not too honest and sharp in your beliefs. If you're positive that you know what to do, you might be another Colonel Wedder, putting your people through a dozen torments for a Utopia which never quite comes true. If you don't care at all, you might be like your uncle. He did no real harm. He just stole his planet blind and he had some extraordinary habits which got him talked about between the stars. He never killed a man in his life, did he?"

"No, sir," said Casher O'Neill, "he never did." It relieved him to tell the one little good thing about his uncle; there was so very, very little which could be said in Kuraf's favor.

"I don't like slobbering old libertines like your uncle," said Philip Vincent, "but I don't hate them either. They don't hurt other people much. As a matter of actual fact, they don't hurt anyone but themselves. They waste property, though. Like these horses you have on Mizzer. We'd never bring living beings to this world of Pontoppidan, just to play games with. And you know we're not poor. We're no Old North Australia, but we have a good income here."

That, thought Casher O'Neill, is the understatement of the year, but he was a careful young man with a great deal at stake, so he said nothing.

The Dictator looked at him shrewdly. He appreciated the value of Casher's tactful silence. Genevieve tugged at his sleeve, but he frowned her interruption away.

"IF," said the Hereditary Dictator, *"if,"* he repeated, "you pass two tests, I will give you a green ruby as big as my head. If my Committee will allow me to do so. But I think I can talk them around. One test is that you let me peep all over your mind, to make sure that I am not dealing with one more honest fool. If you're too honest, you're a fool and a danger to mankind. I'll give you a dinner and ship you off-planet as fast as I can. And the other test is — solve the puzzle of this horse. The one horse on Pontoppidan. Why is the animal here? What should we do with it? If it's good to eat, how should we cook it? Or can we trade to some other world, like your planet Mizzer, which seems to set a value on horses?"

"Thank you, sir —" said Casher O'Neill.

"But, uncle —" said Genevieve.

"Keep quiet, my darling, and let the young man speak," said the Dictator.

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"— all I was going to ask, is," said Casher O'Neill, "what's a green ruby good for? I didn't even know they came green."

"That, young man, is a Pontoppidan specialty. We have a geology based on ultra-heavy chemistry. This planet was once a fragment from a giant planet which imploded. The use is simple. With a green ruby you can make a laser beam which will boil away your city of Kaheer in a single sweep. We don't have weapons here and we don't believe in them, so I won't give you a weapon. You'll have to travel further to find a ship and to get the apparatus for mounting your green ruby. If I give it to you. But you will be one more step along in your fight with Colonel Wedder."

"Thank you, thank you, most honorable sir!" cried Casher O'Neill.

"But uncle," said Genevieve, "you shouldn't have picked those two things because I know the answers."

"You know all about *him*," said the Hereditary Dictator, "by some means of your own?"

Genevieve flushed under her lilac-hued foundation cream. "I know enough for us to know."

"How do you know it, my darling?"

"I just know," said Genevieve.

Her uncle made no comment, but he smiled widely and indulgently as if he had heard that particular phrase before.

She stamped her foot. "And I know about the horse, too. *All* about it."

"Have you seen it?"

"No."

"Have you talked to it?"

"Horses don't talk, uncle."

"Most underpeople do," he said.

"This isn't an underperson, uncle. It's a plain unmodified old Earth animal. It never did talk."

"Then what do you know, my honey?" The uncle was affectionate, but there was the crackle of impatience under his voice.

"I taped it. The whole thing. The story of the horse of Pontoppidan. And I've edited it, too. I was going to show it to you this morning, but your staff sent that young man in."

Casher O'Neill looked his apologies at Genevieve.

She did not notice him. Her eyes were on her uncle.

"Since you've done this much, we might as well see it." He turned to the attendants. "Bring chairs. And drinks. You know mine. The young lady will take tea with lemon. Real tea. Will you have coffee, young man?"

"You have coffee!" cried Casher O'Neill. As soon as he said it, he felt like a fool. Pontoppidan was a *rich* planet. On most worlds' exchanges, coffee came

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out to about two man-years per kilo. Here halftracks crunched their way through gems as they went to load up the frequent trading vessels.

The chairs were put in place. The drinks arrived. The Hereditary Dictator had been momentarily lost in a brown study, as though he were wondering about his promise to Casher O'Neill. He had even murmured to the young man, "Our bargain stands? Never mind what my niece says." Casher had nodded vigorously. The old man had gone back to frowning at the servants and did not relax until a tiger-man bounded into the room, carrying a tray with acrobatic precision. The chairs were already in place.

The father held his niece's chair for her as a command that she sit down. He nodded Casher O'Neill into a chair on the other side of himself.

He commanded, "Dim the lights . . ."

The room plunged into semi-darkness.

Without being told, the people took their places immediately behind the three main seats and the underpeople perched or sat on benches and tables behind them. Very little was spoken. Casher O'Neill could sense that Pontoppidan was a well-run place. He began to wonder if the Hereditary Dictator had much real work left to do, if he could fuss that much over a single horse. Perhaps all he did was boss his niece and watch the robots load truckloads of gems into sacks while the underpeople weighed them, listed them and wrote out the bills for the customers.

II

THERE was no screen; this was a good machine.

The planet Pontoppidan came into view, its airless brightness giving strong hints of the mineral riches which might be found.

Here and there enormous domes, such as the one in which this palace was located, came into view.

Genvieve's own voice, girlish, impulsive and yet didactic, rang out with the story of her planet. It was as though she had prepared the picture not only for her own father, but for off-world visitors as well. (By Joan, that's it! thought Casher O'Neill. If they don't raise much food here, outside of the hydroponics, and don't have any real People Places, they *have* to trade: that does mean visitors, and many, many of them.)

The story was interesting but the girl herself was more interesting. Her face shone in the shifting light which the images — a meter, perhaps a little more,

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from the floor — reflected across the room. Casher O'Neill thought that he had never before seen a woman who so peculiarly combined intelligence and charm. She was girl, girl, girl, all the way through; but she was also very smart and pleased with being smart. It betokened a happy life. He found himself glancing covertly at her. Once he caught her glancing, equally covertly, at him. The darkness of the scene enabled them both to pass it off as an accident without embarrassment.

Her viewtape had come to the story of the *dipsies,* enormous canyons which lay like deep gashes on the surface of the planet. Some of the color views were spectacular beyond belief. Casher O'Neill, as the "appointed one" of Mizzer, had had plenty of time to wander through the non-salacious parts of his uncle's collections, and he had seen pictures of the most notable worlds.

Never had he seen anything like this. One view showed a sunset against a six-kilometer cliff of a material which looked like solid emerald. The peculiar bright sunshine of Pontoppidan's small, penetrating, lilac-hued sun ran like living water over the precipice of gems. Even the reduced image, one meter by one meter, was enough to make him catch his breath.

The bottom of the dipsy had vapor emerging in curious cylindrical columns which seemed to erode as they reached two or three times the height of a man. The recorded voice of Genevieve was explaining that the very thin atmosphere of Pontoppidan would not be breathable for another 2,520 years, since the settlers did not wish to squander their resources on a luxury like breathing when the whole planet only had 60,000 inhabitants; they would rather go on with masks and use their wealth in other ways. After all, it was not as though they did not have their domed cities, some of them many kilometers in radius. Besides the usual hydroponics, they had even imported 7.2 hectares of garden soil, 5.5 centimeters deep, together with enough water to make the gardens rich and fruitful. They had bought worms, too, at the price of eight carats of diamond per living worm, in order to keep the soil of the gardens loose and living.

Genevieve's transcribed voice rang out with pride as she listed these accomplishments of her people, but a note of sadness came in when she returned to the subject of the dipsies. ". . . and though we would like to live in them and develop their atmospheres, we dare not. There is too much escape of radioactivity.

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The geysers themselves may or may not be contaminated from one hour to the next. So we just look at them. Not one of them has ever been settled, except for the Hippy Dipsy, where the horse came from. Watch this next picture."

The camera sheered up, up, up from the surface of the planet. Where it had wandered among mountains of diamonds and valleys of tourmalines, it now took to the blue-black of near, inner space. One of the canyons showed (from high altitude) the grotesque pattern of a human woman's hips and legs, though what might have been the upper body was lost in a confusion of broken hills which ended in a bright almost-iridescent plain to the North.

"That," said the real Genevieve, overriding her own voice on the screen, "is the Hippy Dipsy. There, see the blue? That's the only lake on all of Pontoppidan. And here we drop to the hermit's house."

CASHER O'Neill almost felt vertigo as the camera plummeted from off-planet into the depths of that immense canyon. The edges of the canyon almost seemed to move like lips with the plunge, opening and folding inward to swallow him up.

Suddenly they were beside a beautiful little lake.

A small hut stood beside the shore.

In the doorway there sat a man, dead.

His body had been there a long time; it was already mummified.

Genevieve's recorded voice explained the matter: ". . . in Norstrilian law and custom, they told him that his time had come. They told him to go to the Dying House, since he was no longer fit to live. In Old North Australia, they are so rich that they let everyone live as long as he wants, unless the old person can't take rejuvenation any more, even with stroon, and unless he or she gets to be a real pest to the living. If that happens, they are invited to go to the Dying House, where they shriek and pant with delirious joy for weeks or days until they finally die of an overload of sheer happiness and excitement . . ." There was a hesitation, even in the recording. "We never knew why this man refused. He stood off-planet and said that he had seen views of the Hippy Dipsy. He said it was the most beautiful place on all the worlds, and that he wanted to build a cabin there, to live alone, except for his non-human friend. We thought it was some small pet. When we told him that the Hippy Dipsy was very dangerous, he said that this did not matter in the least to him, since he was old and dying any-

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how. Then he offered to pay us twelve times our planetary income if we would lease him twelve hectares on the condition of absolute privacy. No pictures, no scanners, no help, no visitors. Just solitude and scenery. His name was Perinö. My great-grandfather asked for nothing more, except the written transfer of credit. When he paid it, Perinö even asked that he be left alone after he was dead. Not even a vault rocket so that he could either orbit Pontoppidan forever or start a very slow journey to nowhere, the way so many people like it. So this is our first picture of him. We took it when the light went off in the People Room and one of the tiger-men told us that he was sure a human consciousness had come to an end in the Hippy Dipsy.

"And we never even thought of the pet. After all, we had never made a picture of him. This is the way he arrived from Perinö's shack."

A ROBOT was shown in a control room, calling excitedly in the old Common Tongue.

"People, people! Judgment needed! Moving object coming out of the Hippy Dipsy. Object has improper shape. Not a correct object. Should not rise. Does so anyhow. People, tell me, people, tell me! Destroy or not destroy? This is an improper object. It should fall, not rise. Coming out of the Hippy Dipsy."

A firm click shut off the robot's chatter. A well-shaped woman took over. From the nature of her work and the lithe, smooth tread with which she walked, Casher O'Neill suspected that she was of cat origin, but there was nothing in her dress or in her manner to show that she was underpeople.

The woman in the picture lighted a screen.

She moved her hands in the air in front of her, like a blind person feeling his way through open day.

The picture on the inner screen came to resolution.

A face showed in it.

What a face! thought Casher O'Neill, and he heard the other people around him in the viewing room.

The horse!

Imagine a face like that of a newborn cat, thought Casher. Mizzer is full of cats. But imagine the face with a huge mouth, with big yellow teeth — a nose long beyond imagination. Imagine eyes which look friendly. In the picture they were rolling back and forth with exertion, but even there — when they did not feel observed — there was nothing hostile about the set of the eyes. They were tame, companionable

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eyes. Two ridiculous ears stood high, and a little tuft of golden hair showed on the crest of the head between the ears.

The viewed scene was comical, too. The cat-woman was as astonished as the viewers. It was lucky that she had touched the emergency switch, so that she not only saw the horse, but had recorded herself and her own actions while bringing him into view.

Genevieve whispered across the chest of the Hereditary Dictator: "Later we found he was a palomino pony. That's a very special kind of horse. And Perinö had made him immortal, or almost immortal."

"Sh-h!" said her uncle.

The screen-within-the-screen showed the cat-woman waving her hands in the air some more. The view broadened.

The horse had four hands and no legs, or four legs and no hands, whichever way you want to count them.

The horse was fighting his way up a narrow cleft of rubies which led out of the Hippy Dipsy. He panted heavily. The oxygen bottles on his sides swung wildly as he clambered. He must have seen something, perhaps the image of the cat-woman, because he said a word:

Whay-yay-yay-yay-whay-yay!

The cat-woman in the nearer picture spoke very distinctly:

"Give your name, age, species and authority for being on this planet." She spoke clearly and with the utmost possible authority.

The horse obviously heard her. His ears tipped forward. But his reply was the same as before:

Whay-yay-yay!

Casher O'Neill realized that he had followed the mood of the picture and had seen the horse the way that the people on Pontoppidan woud have seen him. On second thought, the horse was nothing special, by the standards of the Twelve Niles or the Little Horse Market in the city of Kaheer. It was an old pony stallion, no longer fit for breeding and probably not for riding either. The hair had whitened among the gold; the teeth were worn. The animal showed many injuries and burns. Its only use was to be killed, cut up and fed to the racing dogs. But he said nothing to the people around him. They were still spellbound by the picture.

The cat-woman repeated:

"Your name isn't Whayayay. Identify yourself properly; name first."

The horse answered her with the same word in a higher key.

Apparently forgetting that she had recorded herself as well as the emergency screen, the cat-

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woman said, "I'll call real people if you don't answer! They'll be annoyed at being bothered."

The horse rolled his eyes at her and said nothing.

The cat-woman pressed an emergency button on the side of the room. One could not see the other communication screen which lighted up, but her end of the conversation was plain.

"I want an ornithopter. Big one. Emergency."

A mumble from the side screen.

"To go to the Hippy Dipsy. There's an underperson there, and he's in so much trouble that he won't talk." From the screen beside her, the horse seemed to have understood the sense of the message, if not the words, because he repeated:

Whay-yay-whay-yay-yay!

"See," said the cat-woman to the person in the other screen, "that's what he's doing. It's obviously an emergency."

The voice from the other screen came through, tinny and remote by double recording:

"Fool, yourself, cat-woman! Nobody can fly an ornithopter into a dipsy. Tell your silly friend to go back to the floor of the dipsy and we'll pick him up by space rocket."

Whay-yay-yay! said the horse impatiently.

"He's not my *friend*," said the cat-woman with brisk annoyance. "I just discovered him a couple of minutes ago. He's asking for help. Any idiot can see that, even if we don't know his language."

The picture snapped off.

THE next scene showed tiny human figures working with searchlights at the top of an immeasurably high cliff. Here and there, the beam of the searchlight caught the cliff face; the translucent faceted material of the cliff looked almost like rows of eerie windows, their lights snapping on and off, as the searchlight moved.

Far down there was a red glow. Fire came from inside the mountain.

Even with telescopic lenses the cameraman could not get the close-up of the glow. On one side there was the figure of the horse, his four arms stretched at impossible angles as he held himself firm in the crevasse; on the other side of the fire there were the even tinier figures of men, laboring to fit some sort of sling to reach the horse.

For some odd reason having to do with the techniques of recording, the voices came through very plainly, even the heavy, tired breathing of the old horse. Now and then he uttered one of the special horse-words which seemed to be the limit of his vocabulary. He was obviously watching the men, and was firmly persuaded of

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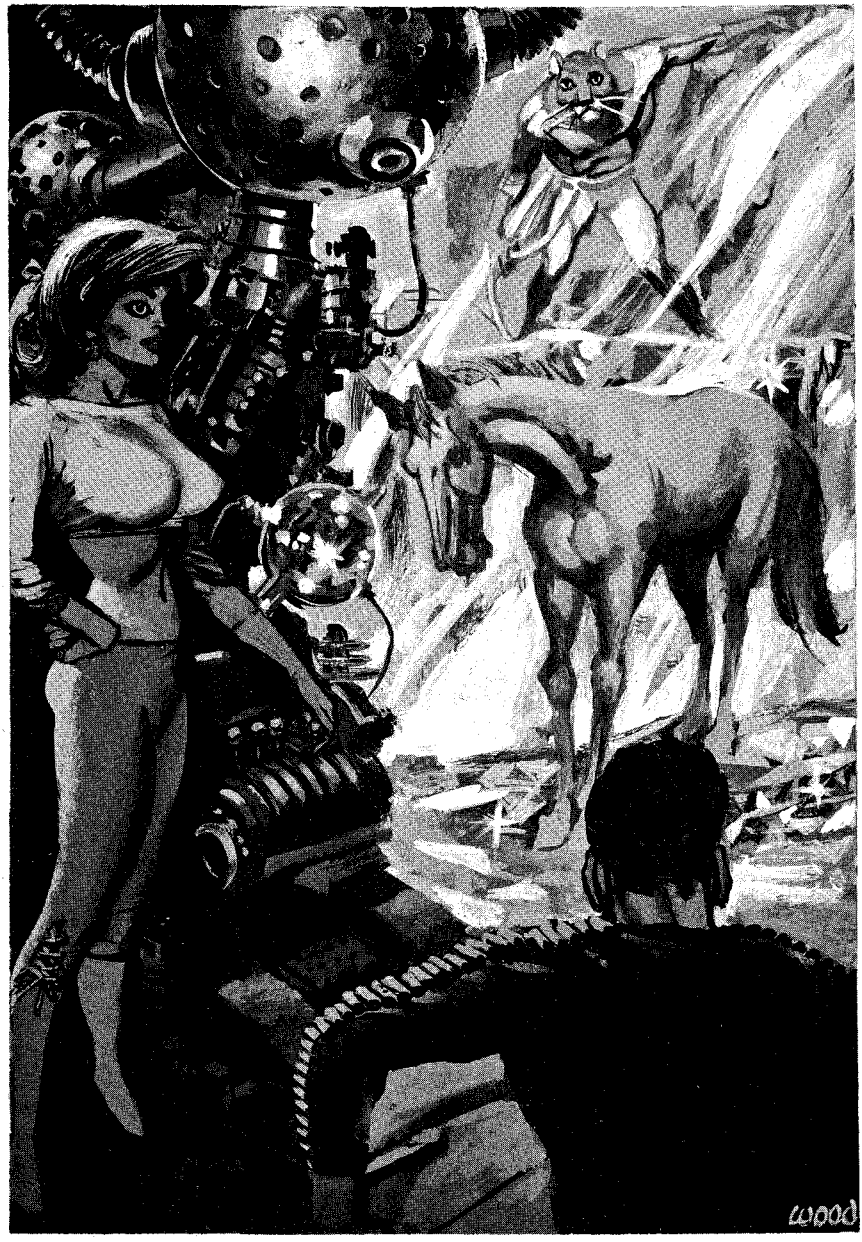

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their friendliness to him. His large, tame, yellow eyes rolled wildly in the light of the searchlight and every time the horse looked down, he seemed to shudder.

Casher O'Neill found this entirely understandable. The bottom of the Hippy Dipsy was nowhere in sight; the horse, even with nothing more than the enlarged fingernails of his middle fingers to help him climb, had managed to get about four of the six kilometers' height of the cliff face behind him.

The voice of a tiger-man sounded clearly from among the shift of men, underpeople and robots who were struggling on the face of the cliff.

"It's a gamble, but not much of a gamble. I weigh six hundred kilos myself, and, do you know, I don't think I've ever had to use my full strength since I was a kitten. I *know* that I can jump across the fire and help that thing be more comfortable. I can even tie a rope around him so that he won't slip and fall after all the work we've done. And the work he's done, too," added the tiger-man grimly. "*Perhaps* I can just take him in my arms and jump back with him. It will be perfectly safe if you have a safety rope around each of us. After all, I never saw a less prehensile creature in my life. You can't call those fingers of his 'fingers.' They look like little boxes of bone, designed for running around and not much good for anything else."

There was a murmur of other voices and then the command of the supervisor. "Go ahead."

No one was prepared for what happened next.

The cameraman got the tiger-man right in the middle of his frame, showing the attachment of one rope around the tiger-man's broad waist. The tiger-man was a modified type whom the authorities had not bothered to put into human cosmetic form. He still had his ears on top of his head, yellow and black fur over his face, huge incisors overlapping his lower jaw and enormous antenna-like whiskers sticking out from his moustache. He must have been thoroughly modified inside, however, because his temperament was calm, friendly and even a little humorous; he must have had a carefully re-done mouth, because the utterance of human speech came to him clearly and without distortion.

He jumped — a mighty jump, right through the top edges of the flame.

The horse saw him.

The horse jumped too, almost in the same moment, also through the top of the flame, going the other way.

The horse had feared the tiger-

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man more than he did the cliff.

The horse landed right in the group of workers. He tried not to hurt them with his flailing limbs, but he did knock one man — a true man, at that — off the cliff. The man's scream faded as he crashed into the impenetrable darkness below.

The robots were quick. Having no emotions except *on, off,* and *high,* they did not get excited. They had the horse trussed and, before the true men and underpeople had ensured their footing, they had signaled the crane operator at the top of the cliff. The horse, his four arms swinging limply, disappeared upward.

The tiger-man jumped back through the flames to the nearer ledge. The picture went off.

In the viewing room, the Hereditary Dictator Philip Vincent stood up. He stretched, looking around.

Genevieve looked at Casher O'Neill expectantly.

"That's the story," said the Dictator mildly. "Now you solve it."

"Where is the horse now?" said Casher O'Neill.

"In the hospital, of course. My niece can take you to see him."

III

AFTER A short, painful and very thorough peeping of his own mind by the Hereditary Dictator, Casher O'Neill and Genevieve set off for the hospital in which the horse was being kept in bed. The people of Pontoppidan had not known what else to do with him, so they had placed him under strong sedation and were trying to feed him with sugar-water compounds going directly into his veins. Genevieve told Casher that the horse was wasting away.

They walked to the hospital over amethyst pebbles.

Instead of wearing his spacesuit, Casher wore a surface helmet which enriched his oxygen. His hosts had not counted on his getting spells of uncontrollable itching from the sharply reduced atmospheric pressure. He did not dare mention the matter, because he was still hoping to get the green ruby as a weapon in his private war for the liberation of the Twelve Niles from the rule of Colonel Wedder. Whenever the itching became less than excruciating, he enjoyed the walk and the company of the slight, beautiful girl who accompanied him across the fields of jewels to the hospital. (In later years, he sometimes wondered what might have happened. Was the itching a part of his destiny, which saved him for the freedom of the city of Kaheer and the planet Mizzer? Might not the innocent brilliant loveliness of the girl have other-

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wise tempted him to forswear his duty and stay forever on Pontoppidan?)

The girl wore a new kind of cosmetic for outdoor walking — a warm peachhued powder which let the natural pink of her cheeks show through. Her eyes, he saw, were a living, deep gray; her eyelashes, long; her smile, innocently provocative beyond all ordinary belief. It was a wonder that the Hereditary Dictator had not had to stop duels and murders between young men vying for her favor.

They finally reached the hospital, just as Casher O'Neill thought he could stand it no longer and would have to ask Genevieve for some kind of help or carriage to get indoors and away from the frightful itching.

The building was underground.

The entrance was sumptuous. Diamonds and rubies, the size of building-bricks on Mizzer, had been set to frame the doorway, which was apparently enameled steel. Kuraf at his most lavish had never wasted money on anything like this door-frame. Genevieve saw his glance.

"It did cost a lot of credits. We had to bring a blind artist all the way from Olympia to paint that enamel-work. The poor man. He spent most of his time trying to steal extra gem-stones when he should have known that we pay justly and never allow anyone to get away with stealing."

"What do you do?" asked Casher O'Neill.

"We cut thieves up in space, just at the edge of the atmosphere. We have more manned boats in orbit than any other planet I know of. Maybe Old North Australia has more, but, then, nobody ever gets close enough to Old North Australia to come back alive and tell."

They went on into the hospital.

A RESPECTFUL chief surgeon insisted on keeping them in the office and entertaining them with tea and confectionery, when they both wanted to go see the horse; common politeness prohibited their pushing through. Finally they got past the ceremony and into the room in which the horse was kept.

Close up, they could see how much he had suffered. There were cuts and abrasures over almost all of his body. One of his *hooves* — the doctor told them that was the correct name, *hoof*, for the big middle fingernail on which he walked — was split; the doctor had put a cadmium-silver bar through it. The horse lifted his head when they entered, but he saw that they were just more people, not horsey people, so he put his head down, very patiently.

"What's the prospect, doctor?"

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asked Casher O'Neill, turning away from the animal.

"Could I ask you, sir, a foolish question first?"

Surprised, Casher could only say yes.

"You're an O'Neill. Your uncle is Kuraf. How do you happen to be called 'Casher'?"

"That's simple," laughed Casher. "This is my young-man-name. On Mizzer, everybody gets a baby name, which nobody uses. Then he gets a nickname. Then he gets a young-man-name, based on some characteristic or some friendly joke, until he picks out his career. When he enters his profession, he picks out his own career name. If I liberate Mizzer and overthrow Colonel Wedder, I'll have to think up a suitable career name for myself."

"But why 'Casher,' sir?" persisted the doctor.

"When I was a little boy and people asked me what I wanted, I always asked for cash. I guess that contrasted with my uncle's wastefulness, so they called me Casher."

"But what is cash? One of your crops?"

It was Casher's time to look amazed. "Cash is money. Paper credits. People pass them back and forth when they buy things."

"Here on Pontoppidan, all the money belongs to me. All of it," said Genevieve. "My uncle is trustee for me. But I have never been allowed to touch it or to spend it. It's all just planet business."

The doctor blinked respectfully. "Now this horse, sir, if you will pardon my asking about your name, is a very strange case. Physiologically he is a pure earth type. He is suited only for a vegetable diet, but otherwise he is a very close relative of man. He has a single stomach and a very large cone-shaped heart. That's where the trouble is. The heart is in bad condition. He is dying."

"Dying?" cried Genevieve.

"That's the sad, horrible part," said the doctor. "He is dying but he cannot die. He could go on like this for many years. Perinö wasted enough stroon on this animal to make a planet immortal. Now the animal is worn out but cannot die."

Casher O'Neill let out a long, low, ululating whistle. Everybody in the room jumped. He disregarded them. It was the whistle he had used near the stables, back among the Twelve Niles, when he wanted to call a horse.

The horse knew it. The large head lifted. The eyes rolled at him so imploringly that he expected tears to fall from them, even though he was pretty sure that horses could not lachrymate.

He squatted on the floor, close

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to the horse's head, with a hand on its mane.

"Quick," he murmured to the surgeon. "Get me a piece of sugar and an underperson-telepath. The underperson-telepath must not be of carnivorous origin."

THE doctor looked stupid. He snapped "Sugar" at an assistant but he squatted down next to Casher O'Neill and said, "You will have to repeat that about an underperson. This is not an underperson hospital at all. We have very few of them here. The horse is here only by command of His Excellency Philip Vincent, who said that the horse of Perinö should be given the best of all possible care. He even told me," said the doctor, "that if anything wrong happened to this horse, I would ride patrol for it for the next eighty years. So I'll do what I can. Do you find me too talkative? Some people do. What kind of an underperson do you want?"

"I need," said Casher, very calmly, "a telepathic underperson, both to find out what this horse wants and to tell the horse that I am here to help him. Horses are vegetarians and they do not like meat-eaters. Do you have a vegetarian underperson around the hospital?"

"We used to have some squirrel-men," said the chief surgeon, "but when we changed the air circulating system the squirrel-men went away with the old equipment. I think they went to a mine. We have tiger-men, cat-men, and my secretary is a wolf."

"Oh, no!" said Casher O'Neill. "Can you imagine a sick horse confiding in a wolf?"

"It's no more than you are doing," said the surgeon, very softly, glancing up to see if Genevieve were in hearing range, and apparently judging that she was not. "The Hereditary Dictators here sometimes cut suspicious guests to pieces on their way off the planet. That is, unless the guests are licensed, regular traders. You are not. You might be a spy, planning to rob us. How do I know? I wouldn't give a diamond chip for your chances of being alive next week. What do you want to do about the horse? That might please the Dictator. And *you* might live."

Casher O'Neill was so staggered by the confidence of the surgeon that he squatted there thinking about himself, not about the patient. The horse licked him, seemingly sensing that he needed solace.

The surgeon had an idea. "Horses and dogs used to go together, didn't they, back in the old days of Manhome, when all the people lived on planet Earth?"

"Of course," said Casher. "We

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still run them together in hunts on Mizzer, but under these new laws of the Instrumentality we've run out of underpeople-criminals to hunt."

"I have a good dog," said the chief surgeon. "She talks pretty well, but she is so sympathetic that she upsets the patients by loving them too much. I have her down in the second underbasement tending the dish-sterilizing machinery."

"Bring her up," said Casher in a whisper.

He remembered that he did not need to whisper about this, so he stood up and spoke to Genevieve:

"They have found a good dog-telepath who may reach through to the mind of the horse. It may give us the answer."

She put her hand on his forearm gently, with the approbatory gesture of a princess. Her fingers dug into his flesh. Was she wishing him well against her uncle's habitual treachery, or was this merely the impulse of a kind young girl who knew nothing of the way the world was run?

IV

THE interview went extremely well.

The dog-woman was almost perfectly humaniform. She looked like a tired, cheerful, worn-out old woman, not valuable enough to be given the life-prolonging santaclara drug called *stroon*. Work had been her life and she had had plenty of it. Casher O'Neill felt a twinge of envy when he realized that happiness goes by the petty chances of life and not by the large destiny. This dog-woman, with her haggard face and her stringy gray hair, had more love, happiness and sympathy than Kuraf had found with his pleasures, Colonel Wedder with his powers, or himself with his crusade. Why did life do that? Was there no justice, ever? Why should a worn-out worthless old underwoman be happy when he was not?

"Never mind," she said, "you'll get over it and then you will be happy."

"Over what?" he said. "I didn't say anything."

"I'm not going to say it," she retorted, meaning that she was telepathic. "You're a prisoner of yourself. Some day you will escape to unimportance and happiness. You're a good man. You're trying to save yourself, but you really *like* this horse."

"Of course I do," said Casher O'Neill. "He's a brave old horse, climbing out of that hell to get back to people."

When he said the word *hell* her eyes widened, but she said nothing. In his mind, he saw the sign

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of a fish scrawled on a dark wall and he felt her think at him, *So you too know something of the "dark wonderful knowledge" which is not yet to be revealed to all mankind?*

He thought *a cross* back at her and then turned his thinking to the horse, lest their telepathy be monitored and strange punishments await them both.

She spoke in words, "Shall we link?"

"Link," he said.

Genevieve stepped up. Her clear-cut, pretty, sensitive face was alight with excitement. "Could I — could I be cut in?"

"Why not?" said the dog-woman, glancing at him. He nodded. The three of them linked hands and then the dog-woman put her left hand on the forehead of the old horse.

THE sand splashed beneath their feet as they ran toward Kaheer. The delicious pressure of a man's body was on their backs. The red sky of Mizzer gleamed over them. There came the shout:

"I'm a horse, I'm a horse, I'm a horse!"

"You're from Mizzer," thought Casher O'Neill, "from Kaheer itself!"

"I don't know names," thought the horse, "but you're from my land. The land, the good land."

"What are you doing here?"

"Dying," thought the horse. "Dying for hundreds and thousands of sundowns. The old one brought me. No riding, no running, no people. Just the old one and the small ground. I have been dying since I came here."

Casher O'Neill got a glimpse of Perinö sitting and watching the horse, unconscious of the cruelty and loneliness which he had inflicted on his large pet by making it immortal and then giving it no work to do.

"Do you know what dying is?"

Thought the horse promptly: "Certainly. No-horse."

"Do you know what life is?"

"Yes. Being a horse."

"I'm not a horse," thought Casher O'Neill, "but I am alive."

"Don't complicate things," thought the horse at him, though Casher realized it was his own mind and not the horse's which supplied the words.

"Do you want to die?"

"To no-horse? Yes, if this room, forever, is the end of things."

"What would you like better?" thought Genevieve, and her thoughts were like a cascade of newly-minted silver coins falling into all their minds: brilliant, clean, bright, innocent.

The answer was quick: "Dirt beneath my hooves, and wet air again, and a man on my back."

The dog-woman interrupted: "Dear horse, you know me?"

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"You're a dog," thought the horse. "Goo-oo-oo-ood dog!"

"Right," thought the happy old slattern, "and I can tell these people how to take care of you. Sleep now, and when you waken you will be on the way to happiness."

She thought the command *sleep* so powerfully at the old horse that Casher O'Neill and Genevieve both started to fall unconscious and had to be caught by the hospital attendants.

As they re-gathered their wits, she was finishing her commands to the surgeon. "— and put about 40% supplementary oxygen into the air. He'll have to have a real person to ride him, but some of your orbiting sentries would rather ride a horse up there than do nothing. You can't repair the heart. Don't try it. Hypnosis will take care of the sand of Mizzer. Just load his mind with one or two of the drama-cubes packed full of desert adventure. Now, don't you worry about me. I'm not going to claim any credit, and I'm not going to give you any more suggestions. People-man, you!" she laughed. "You can forgive us dogs anything, except for being right. It makes you feel inferior for a few minutes. Never mind. I'm going back downstairs to my dishes. I love them, I really do. Good-by, you pretty thing," she said to Genevieve. "And good-bye, wanderer! Good luck to you," she said to Casher O'Neill. "You will remain miserable as long as you seek justice, but when you give up, righteousness will come to you and you will be happy. Don't worry. You're young and it won't hurt you to suffer a few more years. Youth is an extremely curable disease, isn't it?"

She gave them a full curtsey, like one Lady of the Instrumentality saying good-by to another. Her wrinkled old face was lit up with smiles, in which happiness was mixed with a tiniest bit of playful mockery.

"Don't mind me, boss," she said to the surgeon. "Dishes, here I come." She swept out of the room..

"See what I mean?" said the surgeon. "She's so horribly *happy!* How can anyone run a hospital if a dishwasher gets all over the place, making people happy? We'd be out of jobs. Her ideas were good, though."

They were. They worked. Down to the last letter of the dog-woman's instructions.

THERE was argument from the council. Casher O'Neill went along to see them in session.

One councillor, Bashnack, was particularly vociferous in objecting to any action concerning the horse. "Sire," he cried, "sire! We don't even know the name of the

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animal! I must protest this action, when we don't know — "

"That we don't," assented Philip Vincent. "But what does a name have to do with it?"

"The horse has no identity, not even the identity of an animal. It is just a pile of meat left over from the estate of Perinö. We should kill the horse and eat the meat ourselves. Or, if we do not want to eat the meat, then we should sell it off-planet. There are plenty of peoples around here who would pay a pretty price for genuine earth meat. Pay no attention to me, sire! You are the Hereditary Dictator and I am nothing. I have no power, no property, nothing. I am at your mercy. All I can tell you is to follow your own best interests. I have only a voice. You cannot reproach me for using my voice when I am trying to help you, sire, can you? That's all I am doing, helping you. If you spend any credits at all on this animal you will be doing wrong, wrong, wrong. We are not a rich planet. We have to pay for expensive defenses just in order to stay alive. We cannot even afford to pay for air that our children can go out and play. And you want to spend money on a horse which cannot even talk! I tell you, sire, this council is going to vote against you, just to protect your own interests and the interests of the Honorable Genevieve as Eventual Title-holder of all Pontoppidan. You are not going to get away with this, sire! We are helpless before your power, but we will insist on advising you —"

"Hear! Hear!" cried several of the councillors, not the least dismayed by the slight frown of the Hereditary Dictator.

"I will take the word," said Philip Vincent himself.

Several had had their hands raised, asking for the floor. One obstinate man kept his hand up even when the Dictator announced his intention to speak. Philip Vincent took note of him, too:

"You can talk when I am through, if you want to."

He looked calmly around the room, smiled imperceptibly at his niece, gave Casher O'Neill the briefest of nods, and then announced:

"Gentlemen, it's not the horse which is on trial. It's Pontoppidan. It's we who are trying ourselves. And before whom are we trying ourselves, gentlemen? Each of us is before that most awful of courts, his own conscience.

"IF WE kill that horse, gentlemen, we will not be doing the horse a great wrong. He is an old animal, and I do not think that he will mind dying very

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much, now that he is away from the ordeal of loneliness which he feared more than death. After all, he has already had his great triumph — the climb up the cliff of gems, the jump across the volcanic vent, the rescue by people whom he wanted to find. The horse has done so well that he is really beyond us. We can help him, a little, or we we can hurt him, a little; beside the immensity of his accomplishment, we cannot really do very much either way.

"No, gentlemen, we are not judging the case of the horse. We are judging space. What happens to man when he moves out into the Big Nothing? Do we leave Old Earth behind? Why did civilization fall? Will it fall again? Is civilization a gun or a blaster or a laser or a rocket? Is it even a planoforming ship or a pinlighter at his work? You know as well as I do, gentlemen, that civilization is not what we can do. If it had been, there would have been no fall of Ancient Man. Even in the Dark Ages they had a few fusion bombs, they could make some small guided missiles and they even had weapons like the Kaskaskia Effect, which we have never been able to rediscover. The Dark Ages weren't dark because people lost techniques or science. They were dark *because people lost people.* It's a lot of work to be human and it's work which must be kept up, or it begins to fade. Gentlemen, the horse judges us.

"Take the word, gentlemen. 'Civilization' is itself a lady's word. There were female writers in a country called France who made that word popular in the third century before space travel. To be 'civilized' meant for people to be tame, to be kind, to be polished. If we kill this horse, we are wild. If we treat the horse gently, we are tame. Gentlemen, I have only one witness and that witness will utter only one word. Then you shall vote and vote freely."

There was a murmur around the table at this announcement. Philip Vincent obviously enjoyed the excitement he had created. He let them murmur on for a full minute or two before he slapped the table gently and said, "Gentlemen, the witness. Are you ready?"

There was a murmur of assent. Bashnack tried to say, "It's still a question of public funds!" but his neighbors shushed him. The table became quiet. All faces turned toward the Hereditary Dictator.

"Gentlemen, the testimony. Genevieve, is this what you yourself told me to say? Is civilization always a woman's choice first, and only later a man's?"

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"Yes," said Genevieve, with a happy, open smile.

The meeting broke up amid laughter and applause.

V

A month later Casher O'Neill sat in a room in a medium-size planoforming liner. They were out of reach of Pontoppidan. The Hereditary Dictator had not changed his mind and cut him down with green beams. Casher had strange memories, not bad ones for a young man.

He remembered Genevieve weeping in the garden.

"I'm romantic," she cried, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of his cape. "Legally I'm the owner of this planet, rich, powerful, free. But I can't leave here. I'm too important. I can't marry whom I want to marry. I'm too important. My uncle can't do what *he* wants to do — he's Hereditary Dictator and he always must do what the Council decides after weeks of chatter. I can't love you. You're a prince and a wanderer, with travels and battles and justice and strange things ahead of you. I can't go. I'm too important. I'm too sweet! I'm too nice; I hate, hate, hate myself sometimes. Please, Casher, could you take a flier and run away with me into space?"

"Your uncle's lasers could cut us to pieces before we got out."

He held her hands and looked gently down into her face. At this moment he did not feel the fierce, aggressive, happy glow which an able young man feels in the presence of a beautiful and tender young woman. He felt something much stranger, softer, quieter — an emotion very sweet to the mind and restful to the nerves. It was the simple, clear compassion of one person for another. He took a chance for her sake, because the "dark knowledge" was wonderful but very dangerous in the wrong hands.

He took both her beautiful little hands in hers, so that she looked up at him and realized that he was not going to kiss her. Something about his stance made her realize that she was being offered a more precious gift than a sky-lit romantic kiss in a garden. Besides, it was just touching helmets.

He said to her, with passion and kindness in his voice:

"You remember that dog-woman, the one who works with the dishes in the hospital?"

"Of course. She was good and bright and happy, and helped us all."

"Go work with her, now and then. Ask her nothing. Tell her nothing. Just work with her at her machines. Tell her I said so. Happiness is catching. You might

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catch it. I think I did myself, a little."

"I think I understand you," said Genevieve softly. "Casher, good-by and good, good luck to you. My uncle expects us."

Together they went back into the palace.

ANOTHER memory was the farewell to Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. The calm, clean-shaven, ruddy, well-fleshed face looked at him with benign regard. Casher O'Neill felt more respect for this man when he realized that ruthlessness is often the price of peace, and vigilance the price of wealth.

"You're a clever young man. A very clever young man. You may win back the power of your uncle Kuraf."

"I don't want *that* power!" cried Casher O'Neill.

"I have advice for you," said the Hereditary Dictator, "and it is good advice or I would not be here to give it. I have learned the political arts well: otherwise I would not be alive. Do not refuse power. Just take it and use it wisely. Do not hide from your wicked uncle's name. Obliterate it. Take the name yourself and rule so well that, in a few decades, no one will remember your uncle. Just you. You are young. You can't win now. But it is in your fate to grow and to triumph. I know it. I am good at these things. I have given you your weapon. I am not tricking you. It is packed safely and you may leave with it."

Casher O'Neill was breathing softly, believing it all, and trying to think of words to thank the stout, powerful older man when the dictator added, with a little laugh in his voice:

"Thank you, too, for saving me money. You've lived up to your name, Casher."

"Saved you money?"

"The alfalfa. The horse wanted alfalfa."

"Oh, that idea!" said Casher O'Neill. "It was obvious. I don't deserve much credit for that."

"*I* didn't think of it," said the Hereditary Dictator, "and my staff didn't either. We're not stupid. That shows you are bright. You realized that Perinö must have had a food converter to keep the horse alive in the Hippy Dipsy. All we did was set it to alfalfa and we saved ourselves the cost of a shipload of horse food twice a year. We're glad to save that credit. We're well off here, but we don't like to waste things. You may bow to me now, and leave."

Casher O'Neill had done so, with one last glance at the lovely Genevieve, standing fragile and beautiful beside her uncle's chair.

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HIS LAST memory was very recent.

He had paid two hundred thousand credits for it, right on this liner. He had found the Stop-Captain, bored now that the ship was in flight and the Go-Captain had taken over.

"Can you get me a telepathic fix on a horse?"

"What's a horse?" said the Go-Captain. "Where is it? Do you want to pay for it?"

"A horse," said Casher O'Neill patiently, "is an unmodified earth animal. Not underpeople. A big one, but quite intelligent. This one is in orbit right around Pontoppidan. And I will pay the usual price."

"A million Earth credits," said the Stop-Captain.

"Ridiculous!" cried Casher O'Neill.

They settled on two hundred thousand credits for a good fix and ten thousand for the use of the ship's equipment even if there were failure. It was not a failure. The technician was a snake-man: he was deft, cool, and superb at his job. In only a few minutes he passed the headset to Casher O'Neill, saying politely, "This is it, I think."

It was. He had reached right into the horse's mind.

The endless sands of Mizzer swam before Casher O'Neill. The long lines of the Twelve Niles converged in the distance. He galloped steadily and powerfully. There were other horses nearby, other riders, other things, but he himself was conscious only of the beat of the hooves against the strong moist sand, the firmness of the appreciative rider upon his back. Dimly, as in a hallucination, Casher O'Neill could also see the little orbital ship in which the old horse cantered in mid-air, with an amused cadet sitting on his back. Up there, with no weight, the old worn-out heart would be good for many, many years. Then he saw the horse's paradise again. The flash of hooves threatened to overtake him, but he outran them all. There was the expectation of a stable at the end, a rubdown, good succulent green food, and the glimpse of a filly in the morning.

The horse of Pontoppidan felt extremely wise. He had trusted *people* — people, the source of all kindness, all cruelty, all power among the stars. And the people had been good. The horse felt very much horse again. Casher felt the old body course along the river's edge like a dream of power, like a completion of service, like an ultimate fulfilment of companionship.

— CORDWAINER SMITH

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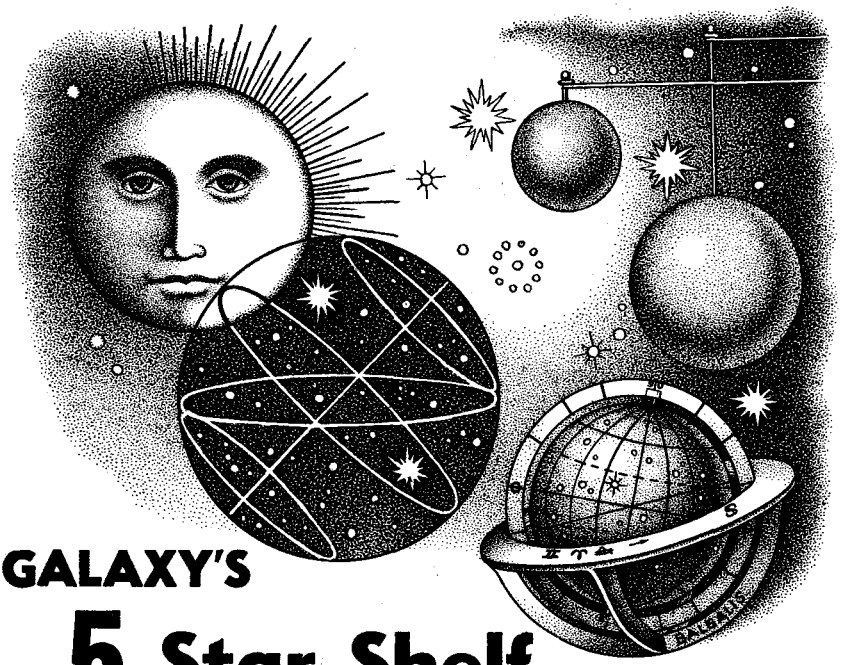

GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

EDGAR RICE Burroughs bulks too large in the fantasy-adventure Hall of Fame to be readily crammed into the limited space of a single column such as this, especially since, after a hiatus of a score of years, an astonishing number of publishers are eager to gamble good money on the ability of his thundering adventures to woo the blasé youth of today. So here is a second roundup of the Master.

If the truth be known, I found it a most pleasant chore to reread the beloved fairy tales, even from the vantage point of our present pinnacle of scientific knowledge. Somehow, despite his frequently embarrassing awkwardness of style and the quaintness of his scientific background, Burroughs can still, to employ that overworked phrase, evoke a "Sense of Wonder".

While Ace Books continues its policy of reissuing the old novels two per month in paperback, several other publishers have joined them on the Burroughs band-

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wagon. The most ambitious of these is Canaveral Press. They have already released eleven hardcovers: four Pellucidar books, a couple of Martian novels and a couple of the memorable single shots: *The Land That Time Forgot, The Cave Girl, The Monster Men* and the first of the Venusian novels, *Pirates of Venus.*

Thuvia, Maid of Mars, The Chessmen of Mars and *The Master Mind of Mars* — fourth, fifth and sixth in the Martian series — are all in a fine paperback volume issued by Dover Publications. It is surprising that Dover elected to start the series in the middle but, since only the first three, or John Carter, stories are sequential, nothing is lost. The Dover editors also showed wisdom in including most of the original artwork by J. Allen St. John, who was a whiz at depicting Burroughs's muscular men, chaste and voluptuous women and monstrous monsters.

A surprise entry in the Burroughs Stakes is Ballantine Books, who have announced their intention to reissue the entire Martian series, one volume per month. Since there are ten books in the series, they will obviously be well occupied for most of a year . . . further plans depending upon the degree of acceptance by their paying public.

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT. Canaveral Press.

Canaveral is the only publisher so far to reissue what must be considered the most noteworthy of Burroughs's singles.

Because Burroughs wrote when many areas of the world map remained blank, he was always on the lookout for an exotic, unknown region in which to base a story. Caprona, the mythical continent of compass-deflecting metal that the eighteenth century Italian navigator, Caproni, reported as lying deep in South Pacific waters, was a natural for his choice of a locale in which to plant the seed of an intriguing mystery.

Burroughs's huge island, protected from external weather by high sheer cliffs, duplicates eons of evolution by geographical means. The low, steamy atmosphere of the south is analogous to that of the reptilian eras and, as the land gradually rises to the north, flora and fauna rise correspondingly on the evolutionary scale. ERB utilizes this background for a startling concept. His island humans evolve outside the womb, traversing the island from south to north and rising from tadpole to full human estate.

The novel, one of the author's longest, was written in the fiercely chauvinistic atmosphere of WW I

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but contains sheer, headlong adventure that is unusual even for an ERB thriller.

A FIGHTING MAN OF MARS. Both Canaveral Press and Ace Books.

TO A marked degree, it appears as if Burroughs patterned many of his stories after the Arabian Nights. There are similar exotic environments, almost identical social structures, polygamy (practiced only by the bad guys, of course); slavery is normal, and precious jewels and gorgeous silks and tapestries are flaunted before the imaginative eye of the reader.

Also, Burroughs's scientific marvels are seldom woven into the fabric of his cultures, as is the way with modern science fiction, but are exploited for their semi-magical shock value . . . in much the same manner that the powers of the Jinn were employed to twist a plot in extraordinary fashion.

The Burroughs stories abound in abductions, and *Fighting Man* is no exception. Hadron of Hastor pursues the (polygamous) villains back to Jahar, a country whose cowardly ruler schemes to conquer all of Barsoom through the (semi-magical) twin inventions of the paint of invisibility and the ray of disintegration.

Burroughs's choice of a model was a wise one. The Arabian Nights are corking good adventure stories in their own right.

THE MONSTER MEN. Both Canaveral Press and Ace Books.

CANAVERAL AND Ace have both reissued the above with Ace having an edge both in price and in artwork. The Canaveral editors exercised poor judgment in their choice of Mahlon Blaine as illustrator for several of their books. His delicate, unearthly pictures are eminently suited for stories such as those of H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith or James Branch Cabell but not for the muscular fantasy of Burroughs. There are rumors, however, that these illustrations are to be redone by Frank Frazetta, who, ironically, illustrated the Ace edition of *Monster Men* and who captures the essence of the stories to far greater degree.

Although this book suffers from some of Burroughs's worst writing, there is still a lot of excitement in his tale of a subman who discovers that he is really a superman.

TARZAN AT THE EARTH'S CORE. Ace Books, Dover Publications, Canaveral Press.

DAVID INNES, Emperor of Pellucidar, immured in the dungeons of Korsar, is in deep trouble (no pun intended) and

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Tarzan is summoned to the rescue. The relief expedition that he is asked to join has constructed a giant rigid dirigible of an extremely light and strong metal that Tarzan had conveniently discovered in some lost mines, strong enough to contain a vacuum.

T.A.T.E.C. was written shortly after the Italian dirigible, *Norge*, had safely negotiated a passage over the North Pole in the 1920's and at a time when rigid lighter-than-air ships appeared to hold the key to massive commercial and military conquest of the air.

For convenience, and also to exploit the contemporary lack of contrariwise proof, Burroughs envisioned a polar opening through which to insert his favorite hero into the mixed-up ecology of the inner world. The gigantic reptilian and mammalian carnivores of Pellucidar are far more suitable adversaries for Tarzan than the badly overmatched denizens of our modern jungles.

Burroughs, incidentally, advances the interesting theory, as good as any, that the giant carnivores might have been the agents of their own destruction on the outer crust by developing intelligence of high enough order to enable them to hunt cooperatively in concert, hastening the extinction of their natural prey and themselves.

THE CAVE GIRL. Canaveral Press.

BURROUGHS MUST have written this story with tongue in cheek. He casts away his hero, a Bostonian with the unlikely name of Waldo Emerson Smith-Jones, on a tiny, uncharted South Pacific island to face primitive cave-people and a wild environment more suited to the specialized talents of Tarzan.

Smith-Jones fumbles his way, successfully of course, through a typical Burroughs adventure yarn, which is sufficient reason for the ardent Burroughs fan to have made this one of the scarcest of collector's items during recent dearth of Burroughs books.

PIRATES OF VENUS. Dover Publications, Canaveral Press, Ace Books.

THREE PUBLISHERS have all taken a crack at this Burroughs classic. Ace, in paperback, is of course the bargain of the lot. The hardcover edition, with the powerful advantage of original illustrations by J. Allen St. John, is by Canaveral, while Dover has coupled it with *Lost on Venus* as a quality paperback edition. The latter I haven't yet seen, but Dover assures me that it is as well executed as its *Three Martian Novels* and will also contain a selection of the original St. John illustrations.

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Burroughs turned to Venus for inspiration after he had pretty well exhausted the melodramatic potential of Mars. His hero, Carson Napier, out-did "Wrong-Way Corrigan" by a considerable stretch both in time and error by aiming for Mars and reaching Venus. Despite his usual penchant for coincidence and gratuitously fortuitous happenstances (whew!), his power of invention in the realm of pure adventure remains keen throughout the Venusian series.

In addition to the above, Dover also plan to bring out coupled volumes of other titles.

Ballantine, of all the involved publishers, is releasing its volumes in sequence, starting with *A Princess of Mars,* the first in the series, and also the first Burroughs novel ever to be published (he used the pseudonym, Norman Bean), and following it with *The Gods of Mars,* etc.

It is surprising how the wheel has suddenly turned, thrusting Burroughs back into prominence after two decades of obscurity. He wrote a total of twenty-four Tarzan books, ten Martian, four Venusian and five Pellucidarian novels, as well as a large number of single titles. It remains to be seen whether this huge legacy of adventure will be allowed to die for a second, and possibly final time. — **FLOYD C. GALE**

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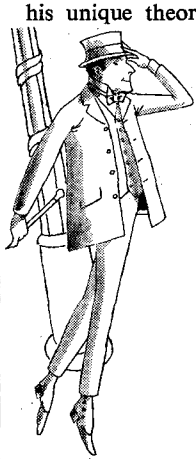

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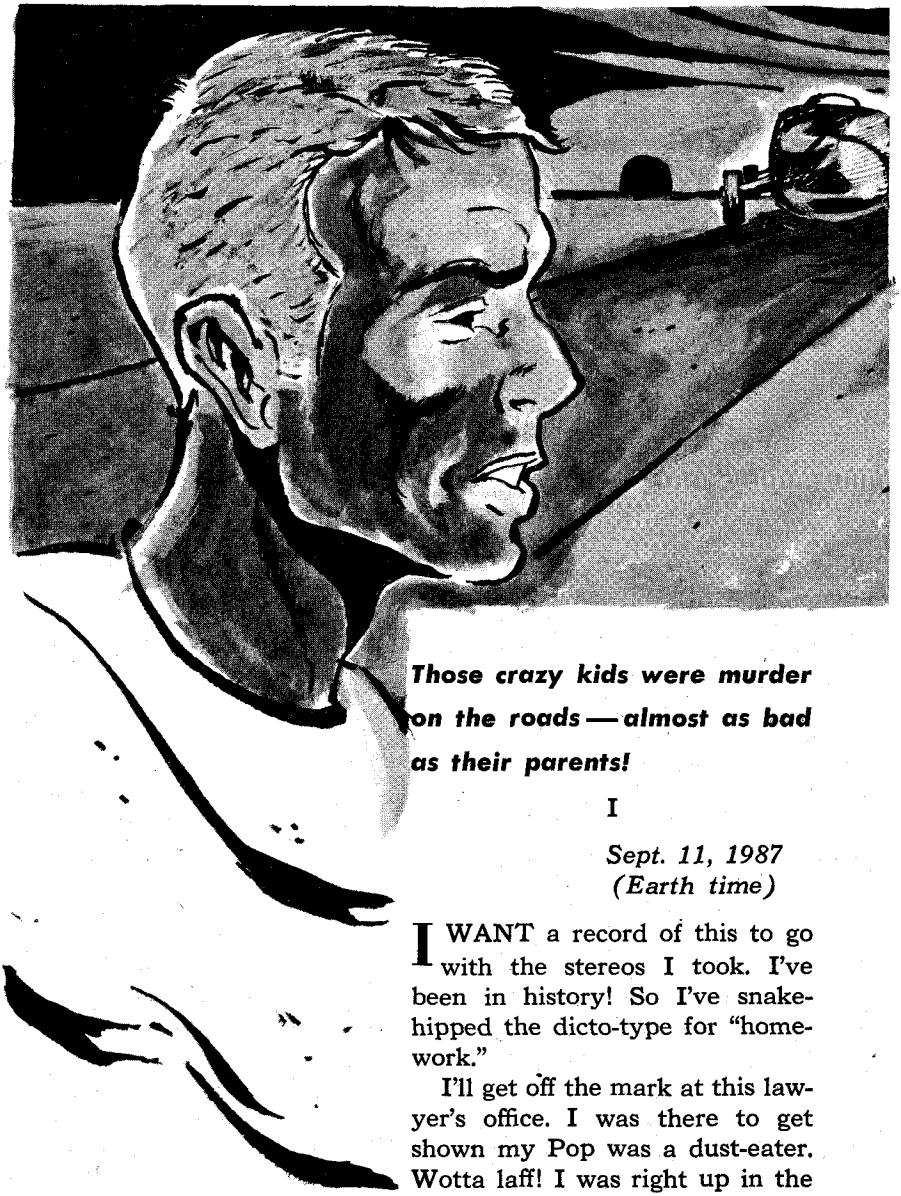

Those crazy kids were murder on the roads — almost as bad as their parents!

I

Sept. 11, 1987
(Earth time)

I WANT a record of this to go with the stereos I took. I've been in history! So I've snake-hipped the dicto-type for "homework."

I'll get off the mark at this lawyer's office. I was there to get shown my Pop was a dust-eater. Wotta laff! I was right up in the

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A DAY ON DEATH HIGHWAY

By CHANDLER ELLIOTT

Illustrated by LUTTENS

front seat with him, bucking this frame-up. He's so get-off-the-road, and he wasn't letting this old shyster pass *him*. He said nonchalant, "Look, Mr. Craik. I'm retaining you to *fight* this biased, vindictive judgement, not lecture me on it, to protect *my* rights."

Craik mugged: "That assumes you've left me some rights to protect, Mr. Blaire. You haven't. You are permanently debarred from operation of any power vehicle. I can do nothing further for you."

"Appeal! Fix it! I can pay." And he sure can.

The old moke tightened his mouth: "I infer you made the money by methods to match your driving record, not by grasp of essentials. I'll try again. This biased, vindictive judgement was handed down by the highest court your case can reach. Can you grasp *that?*"

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Pop came right back like the great sportsfan he is, "Well, we can contest those two-bit charges I hadn't time to fight when they were made. I know they can't debar me finally on uncontested stuff."

The old guy looped down his eyelids: "If you'd ever bothered to appear in court yourself, or even read the transcripts, you would also know that all charges have been contested. Apparently you've been so cotton-wooled by insurance and connections and smart lawyers, you think you can brush off even child-murder."

Pop bounced up, ready to ditch the moke: "Why, you . . . ! "

"Your failure was no thanks to you. Would you have to kill children in actual fact to sober you? The community is not minded to let you try the experiment. This isn't 1975, you know."

The two-timing old right-laner! I'd been told to keep my muffler cut, but there's times when you surge or burst. I surged, "And don't *we* ever get to score? A bunch of mokes get him in a jam, and a fresh cop calls us Flight of the Stumblebum — because we have a yellow 'n' black zoom. Does my Pop have to take that gravel?"

Craik looked at me like I was a parking ticket. "Well, I suppose a lad should be loyal to his father. Pity it's not in a better cause. So, yes, my budding Big Shot, he does. On triple probation, he drove with such dashing irresponsibility that he sheared off three steel guard-posts and barely missed a group of children. He'll take what anyone calls him, and thank them it wasn't worse." He swung back at Pop. "I took your case to pay off a favor to Sam Hardy. I consider I've paid in full. And the case is closed."

Pop kept a manly silence. Mom took over: "But, Mr. Craik, how can my husband do business without a car? A Plutomat representative can't *walk* up to a prospect's door like a peddler. This destroys my family's livelihood."

"Your husband should have considered that sooner, Mrs. Blaire."

My rad just boiled to hear her having to take the old honk-honk from minions of the law. I've never been much on girls because Mom is my ideal, and only my young sister Judy comes in that custom model. And I was just a skinny Teener, helpless to defend the family honor. But I sneaked a squeeze of her hand.

Pop said grimly, "Then these fanatics have ruined me. I have no place to go in this so-called Free World."

Craik shrugged: "Then find a Parallel that will take you, and get Translated, Mr. Blaire. That would solve everybody's prob-

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lems." Obviously he was including his own.

I perked up. Translation, switch to a parallel time, might be good.

Pop said, "That costs a fortune."

Craik shrugged again: "It might cost less than your dauntless career here. I'll send my account." He froze us out like trash.

THIS record being for posterity, I better give the true facts which are already being suppressed. Because I've boned up on them.

So, this LLL pest started in '75, the Golden Age of Go. A bunch called the Regular Guys had gotten the laws modernated — "safe and reasonable speed," nationwide. They backed Bucky Kooznik who'd been framed in a speed-trap, and won in Supreme Court. They backed Senator Smurge for Vice President—the prince who got a national speed law laughed into the wreckers by tacking on an amendment to make the limit ninety—and got him in.

Well, this low-octane third party, the Life and Limb League (Lily-Livered Lunks, we called them) tried to buck the traffic. Their candidate, Bob Green, had had a kid killed and had sort of blown his tires. Well, sure, like Pop says, it's too bad but we can't all live in bungalows because kids fall downstairs. Anyway, LLL got a loud boff and lost all its deposits. Only Green kept squawking about how hiway deaths jumped from 87,000 in '76, to 116,000 in '78; and he signed up relatives and friends of "victims," and soreheads who'd got bunged up and couldn't be sports about it, and natural-born cranks and scaredy-pants. You wouldn't think people would vote to get themselves traffic tickets. But in '78, LLL won seats in Congress, and more in '80.

So we stopped laughing and fought back. We sued a paper for a cartoon of Smurge with his arms around a goony driver and a skeleton, saying, "My Buddies!" And the court ratted on us, and it upheld disgusting photos of crashes and libels that said more than "the car went out of control." So drivers got nervous and the "toll" climbed on.

Then, in '84, Green got in, and showed what a fanatic at the wheel will do. Laws, laws, laws. We said "They can't arrest everybody." Oh, no? Fines, confiscations, jail for thousands of respectable people. And a Gestapo of Lily-white drivers'd spot you using the old elbow or boomin' the amber, and you'd get a stinking card that you'd lost points. Twenty-five points got you a fine and a goo-talk about "mental at-

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titudes.". Blah! What about guts and skill and all that?

Well, we figured there'd soon be enough people sore to give us a comeback. So LLL claimed they'd saved 30,000 lives in '85. So what the heck, it wouldn't have been *you* anyway. But there aren't many real fighters like Pop, and the Old Cause was driven to the curb.

POP had to drive home real humble because if they caught him now, they'd jail him, *him*, a free citizen. But he was looking stern and unbowed, like a guerrilla hero in Tri-Di.

So presently I said, "Pop, let's do it!"

Mom chimed in, "Yes, Gail, if you can't work *here*, let's at least ask about it." Mom's real practical under the hood.

Judy was keen too. At fourteen, in Ye Good Olde Daze, she'd have been a zee already. Now, she'd have to wait two years.

So Pop got into passing gear. And just a week later he came home with his hat cocked and his heels clicking, and summoned us all to the tridiroom. "Well, keeds," he said, "they sure picked on the wrong man when they picked on ol' Buck Blaire. Biggest favor anyone ever did us. It seems there's a world called Jehu (some crackjaw gibberish in *their* language) after some old prophet. Anyway, Plutomat's granted me planetary franchise. Izzat good or is it?

"And tape this, keeds! That planet's set up for *adults*. They're drivin' fools, wonderful roads, most powerful zooms anywhere, *and*, get this, nary a traffic law or a traffic court on the planet."

Judy puzzled: "But, Daddy they must have *some* laws, like which side you drive on . . ."

Pop's always indulged Judy. "Well, honey, that's *rules;* and anyone with sense knows when rules do and don't matter. Like if I drive on the left on an empty street, whose business is it? See, Judy, put deadheads off the road, leave things to skill and experience and you're *safe*. Their accident-rate's just about nil—naturally."

"Well, it sounds funny to me. You be careful." Mom said.

"You been skull-scrubbed by Triple-L, keed? You never come out front unless you muscle into openings, like fast. That's the secret of all big operators—Cesar, Napoleon, Buck Blaire—split-second decisions. We've gotta take off in a cloud of clamshells, and we can't wait for a lecture course. But you can vote on it. Now. All in favor of saying Nay, say Aye. Nobody? Carried! Oh, by the way, old Craik ain't such a bad old moke after all. He tipped me

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off on this Jehu place himself the other day."

"Huh!" I thought. "*I* wouldn't trust that pussy-schnook much."

But Pop took off with his rubber scorchin': Plutomat contract, Translation permit, appointment with the movers. The skids and zees in my gang were cynical; but I knew I'd get my own back, and I just sat tight and soaked up Jehuan by hypnophone.

Came The Day. A crew put up a frame around our lot, higher than the house, and into the ground. I asked the foreman if it marked out the block that was going to be swapped with a block of Jehu.

"You aren't as dumb as you look, kid," he said, "which must be a consolation to your folks. That's what it does."

"Thanx," I said and strolled off. Gee, I hate a fresh guy!

Sure, a butterfly-collector could have had a field-day in my stomach, when the fresh foreman called all his gang out and began countdown. Mom and Judy were too bunny to come out, but Pop and I stood on the steps. I felt revved up, then, like beating another zoom around a curve, and at Minus Five I called to all the skids in the crowd watching, "Here go the Regulars. We will Return!" like that historical guy on tri-di. Pop just stood stern and unbowed.

WOTTA zump! Fifty light-years? Gimme a yippee-cart on Thrill-Hill! No stars streaking past, no roar, no icy chill. Just a jutter in your gizzard and there you were on a street like the old one with the houses shuffled. Even the crew to take down the frame looked the same. But not the guy who was there to welcome us; *he* had a lah-de-dah coat with wide skirts and lace like in Abe Washington's time, but he was a big, hard-looking zow like a zoom-bike cop. His zoom was a weirdy, too. Whee enough like an import job and done in this novelty one-tone finish, but no jem-krust trim, no swordfish roof-crest, no flared bumpers; it wouldn't have helped *my* eggo much. The only real decoration was a leaping red tiger on all panels. He said he was to be our Patron, name of Thrangar Glash.

I gave him the old Hi-de-ho and he froze my fuel-line. But when Mom and Judy came out, he swooned them with his bowing and oil-pressure. And when Mom was disappointed at the view, he explained, "This is just the Terran suburb, Madam. When I have advised you all on our, ah, driving customs, you can visit the main city."

Pop scowled: "I was told you drove by common sense."

Glash gave him a lopsided

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look: "True. But common sense differs in different places, sir. Shall we go in?"

So we did, and Pal Patron Glash gave us the route-map. And had I been mucho right about old Schnooks Craik!

Sure, they had no traffic laws or cops, no penalty points, no fines, no nothing. Sure! Only just this: If you merely annoyed another driver, much less bent his tin, he could challenge you to fight him. They fought in a public arena, on a sort of yippee-cart called a whippet, with sort of bull-whips. You wore leather armor, only the defender got less and darn little if he'd hurt or killed someone. " 'Course," Glash drawled, "even for blood-guilt, the limit's twenty minutes, and sometimes a dashing player comes off with his life."

"His *l-life?*" Mom said. "With *whips?*"

"Oh, a very spirited weapon, ma'am. I've dueled little, having been bred to courtesy but—" he touched his left cheek, which was all scarred—"one keeps in practice with one-cheek affairs, in case one becomes seriously involved."

So he gave us the layout, and they had it set up like some game. Kids, gals, old gaffers, if you drove you were liable. No subs, not for wives or kids or sweeties. Only a Court of Honor appointed one if a bully had fixed a fight on somebody weaker or when an innocent guy was killed or disabled. A woman bashed a man's zoom, she fought. Fair enough. Like pal Thrangar said, "We're all equal, eh? Well, there's no chivalry between equals, only courtesy." And if you didn't play up you were outlaw and they'd ram you or run you off the road and you had no comeback. All tied up tighter 'n a sales contract.

Finally Pop said, "I've been framed. I was lied into this."

"Really, sir? Our embassy provided no literature?"

Well, who reads *literature?* The *real* dope they'll shove in your face, Pop always says. And they hadn't. So it was same as lying. Huh?

Pop said, "I *was* told this was a free society."

"My dear Blaire, a society is free only to choose its rules. An aggressive race like yours, or mine, craves to domineer. You've got to control that itch from running wild in millions of free spirits."

"Yeh-yeh, sure. By common sense. Now me . . ."

"Ah, *yours,* naturally. Mine too, I trust. But—everyone's? No, you've just three systems that work: Public law, which irked you; posse law to hunt down pests which—" he flicked an eyebrow—"irked you even more; or a code of honor."

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Pop scowled. He always says, the first freedom oughta be freedom from preach. Then he hit back: "O-kay! Anything you jokers can do, I can pass you."

And I felt proud again.

"True sporting spirit, sir. So, study our code and our manners in practice. Get your whippet and join a school of arms. Then I'll introduce you to our Arena." And he flourished himself out.

Back in the hall, Pop said "Hullo!" and picked up a letter that must have come before we left Earth. Inside was a sheet of letterhead, "Craik, Creak, Croak and Crock," and on it, in quotes:

"When insolence outruneth law, men customarily arm themselves to chastise offense on the body of the offender. As the proverb saith: No courtesy sans valor."

Leon da Milhâo.

The old speed-trap! He was giving us the razz. But we'll show him.

II

Oct. 3, 1987

WELL, we've started. At first Pop was sore all the time, like he was stuck behind a squad-car. At dinner he'd burst out, "Ahhh, what yokels! Yap-yap with the horns every move you make, yap-yap. Back-seat driving from other people's back seats — it's going to rattle even me into fender-denting. It's a good thing our Thunderbolt Twelve can accelerate out of anything these lunks can mess up."

"Ahh, you've been skull-scrubbed by Triple-L. Let 'em try."

As for us, this town's got nothing for Teeners. Whippet-school *could* be fun. Whippets *are* like a yippee-cart with a saddle instead of a seat, to give you free action; not real fast because you fight in a half-mile arena, but they turn like squirrels. But the teacher red-lights any fun. He has moustaches like wind-swept fenders, and he's worse than the horn-yappers: "Do that over, young fool. Recover, recover, you'll get your face opened. With little-stuff brains don't try to be big stuff." Spoils your nerve. I'm beginning to catch on. Mom's slower, and she won't drive on the street nohow, even with the novice plates. Judy's real sharp, but Mom won't let her out either, in spite of her having natural-born driving rights here.

But Pop's a wham, a natural. After lesson 3, he came striding out: "See me clip the pro, keeds? I think I'm gonna *like* this."

"You'll feel different if you were risking a real cut, Gail."

"Nyahhh! Steady nerve and educated reflexes, that's *real* safety."

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Well, on the way home, there's this traffic signal down past our house. You don't *have* to stop, just yield right-of-way which Pop says makes sense, though the other zoom's gotta be half across for Pop to yield, but Jehuans treat them real bunny. So, this native zoom ahead of us dragged down slow to make the corner just as it changed, like mokes do. Well, we should linger while he played games? Pop whipped the Stumblebum past and across the guy's front into our drive, spray-in' gravel, and pulled the foaming steeds to their haunches. Ye Olde High Style!

So here comes this Jehuan stalking across the lawn, a skinny guy in floppy green. He makes a bow to Mom and Ju and a stiff inch to Pop: "Sir, you drive with novice plates."

"A blind cop could see that." Pop said, "What about it?"

"Just this, sir. When you can no longer hide behind them, you will put your hog's elbow in my face again, and I will bleed your insolence. I will watch for you, believe me."

"Don't bother," Pop said. "Gimme your address, and I'll drive up and down your block till you come out — if you do."

So the guy gave him a card and bowed himself off. Pop looked after him, jingling his pockets. "He'll do to start on."

THEN Glash took us to the Arena, in his zoom. I'll say this for Jehuans, when they go, they Go; so when they do tangle, it's a dilly. We went down the main drag in a stream of zooms at sixty steady, with Glash giving exhaust about the average being twice the speed in any Earth city, and how he never *needed* to use his brakes. Sure, but in two blocks I was antsy-pantsy with that old bull-man urge-to-surge, while Glash defaulted chance after chance to Score.

So, out where you'd expect a ball-park, was this Arena like the Colossus of Rome. It wasn't a tenth full, but two guys were looping and lashing, like at the school only more exciting because they had open left cheeks. But neither scored, and another pair took over.

Glash looked bored and I lost interest too after five of these quickies and only one guy cut. But people kept trickling in, and Glash said, "Ah! About time for the main event. This high-ridin' ass, y'know, ran down a child on a back street. City's been debatin' how much leather he should get for challenger's parental negligence. I hear it's only a collar. Minimum. A cut to the larynx or big neck vessels ends a bout without a sportin' chance."

Pop said real cool, "Well, what chance does *that* give him?

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"Say fifty to one. Challenger's a tough whip and deadly angry."

Mom and Ju looked green. They've stopped more than once to view a crash but maybe they figured deliberate gore was something else.

Mom said, "Well, I don't think the little girl should see this."

Glash made a fish-mouth: "I cannot agree, madam. If a child isn't blooded young, it'll play the fool in emergencies."

Just then, a referee came out on a platform halfway down the arena and the duellers appeared at opposite ends with their seconds and doctors, which they have for serious fights.

People were piling in till there wasn't standing room.

My heart was going bu-bop bu-bop.

Glash drawled, "Ha! They've made challenger bare his right arm. That narrows the odds somewhat. This should be a notable Drive."

Yehr, and he'd fixed to have us see the execution. Thanx!

Came a pistol-shot that yanked the props out from my stomach.

The crowd gasped "Off!" Then not a peep — you could be challenged yourself for a disturbance. You could hear the motors snarl, even the sand grunt at swerves.

They didn't come right in, like in spite-fights. Defender swung wide and then, when challenger closed, whipped behind him on two wheels and zipped down the arena. And they kept on swingin'er big and snappin'er tight till I began to think defender would make it. Then a look at the big arena clock showed only six minutes gone.

Challenger had lashed twice and missed. Then, before I knew it, he did a skid-curve and nicked defender's shoulder. Not much, but the guy began to bleed, lost his nerve and got two more in two minutes.

He pulled himself together and kept clear for a bit again. Then, just half-time, he goofed. He'd got on challenger's tail, and the old scoring spirit surged, and he took a crack at him. It only hit leather, and a crack costs time. Challenger veered, slam-braked, swiped as the guy shot past and scored an awful slice on his arm.

Well, that was it. Defender dropped his whip and just steered. But he was dazed and losing blood. Challenger flicked and flicked.

I got all churned up. Here was this guy, could see the arena, and hear the whippets yarrr, and feel his cuts. And if he didn't do more than he *could* do, in a couple of minutes he wouldn't know anything.

Same time, challenger was coming through like on mental

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FM: "She'll never pounce onto the bed with me again. (Crack!) Never have college and a wedding. (Crack!) How many thousand of your smart tricks was *that* worth? (Ca-rack!)" It made me sick and dry.

Defender played so crazy, he hung on for a bit, and I began to wonder again, would he make it. Six to go and my lungs were tied in a bownot. Challenger figure-8ed but reversed in the second loop; defender saw a big body-slash coming, just too late. He banked so tight, he toppled. He kicked the ejector-lever and flung clear.

Everybody stood up.

He spread-eagled, like in a wreck I saw once, and his whippet batted around spinning and scrabbling on its side. Challenger cut around it so sharp, I thought he'd tip too, and headed straight for the guy. Defender tried to heave clear . . . "My little honey!" . . . Ribs crack like wet sticks . . .

Nobody talked. Even Garsh didn't pump any pi-jaw.

But when we got home and Mom was hoping that now he wouldn't take so many chances, Pop said, "Look, keed, in this life you *take* chances or live in a keg. You just gotta be equal to them."

And the very day the novice plates came off the Stumblebum, he came home whistling and announced he'd fixed a fight with this guy who'd left his address. "Keep me in practice, like Garsh says."

Well, I guess he needs it. So far, they could only yap-yap when he double-parked at rush-hour, or blocked a side-street, or motor-boated through puddles. Now, he'll spend half his time in that arena. And some day he'll outsmart himself into a biggie.

III

Oct. 28, '87.

THE day of his first duel, Pop came home free-wheeling as a tomcat. Ju and I had the day off from school, but we weren't going. "No family," Pop had said. "This new back-seat driving would put me off. I could feel it from 'way up in the stands. Jonesie and I have arranged to back each other in these deals." So he had lunch and they took off on their whippets.

I got myself into sporting bags for an afternoon all to myself with the zoom, and tip-toed down to the garage.

Well, the zoom was gone. That stalled me. Pop had his whippet. Mom still wouldn't drive a block alone, or let Judy, to Ju's permanent sulk. Maybe Mom *and* Ju . . .? Then I heard Mom upstairs, and called, "Mom, where's Ju?"

Mom dashed down like beat-

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ing an amber. But no Ju anywhere. Mom kept breathing, "The little fool! Oh, the little fool!" Then aloud, "She's your father all over. Oh, if she's gone in that car . . ."

Of course, Ju had. Pop's fight had revved her up to thiry over the limit, and she'd gone to see. Like that, she was a suicide menace.

The police just shrugged over the phone: "Driving is private business, madam. We do not interfere." (Pop's standby!)

So, without a car, what could we do? Mom took a calmifier and lay down. I sat on the front steps and strewed cigarette butts.

At that, I didn't see Judy coming till she turned up the walk, on foot. She was a mess, all blowsy from crying. If she'd crossed many streets, it was just luck we didn't have to whip someone for running her down. She blubbered, "Du-don't start ku-questions, pu-*please*." But Mom didn't swallow *that* line and shook her till her hair flopped. So she told.

She was near the Arena, feeling pretty high, when some moke ahead slowed for a right turn, like mokes do. Well, you don't pass any faster, I guess, but a Regular like Pop swings big left to show his Style and opinion of mokes. So naturally Ju swung and bashed head-on into another zoom at these Jehu speeds. She said, "The wu-woman was in the middle, I swear. But she claims she hadn't room."

Another woman was bad. Even against rules, men often go easy on a girl; a woman, never. This zee claimed injury, and several other drivers were mad enough to swear anything. This wouldn't be any one-check deal.

We were so razzed, we never heard the whippet pull in.

But I heard Pop clickety-clacking up the path, and got to the tridiroom door as he flipped his hat onto the rack: "Well, well, is this all the victor's welcome? Where's Mom and Judy?"

Mom pushed by me and stood glaring at him. But Pop never did notice red lights much. He breezed on, "Yezzir! Ol' Killer Blaire clipped him, and him a thirty-fight veteran. And not a mark on me. Reflexes, like I've always told you. Now, how's about . . ."

Well, I'd seen it in boffies but never expected to in real life. Mom smashed a vase-lamp on his head and towered over him. "Well, that's a mark on you now, Reflex-brains!" . . . and told him the score in about ten words, ending, "And I haven't raised a sweet child to be disfigured because her father's a retarded Teener."

"Aw right, aw right! No reason to blow your tires at *me*. What've

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I done? We'll fix it. I suppose you never thought of Glash?"

She said, soft, "*You* fix it. *You* call Glash, you and your steel nerves. I don't believe you grasp the situation *yet*."

He slouched to the phone and I snaked up to the bedroom phone extension. Well, Glash had a big pick-up for Judy, like they all do, but he couldn't fix the ticket. "Blaire, if defender could substitute, I'd go in for her myself. What was the woman's insignia? . . . Red tornado? Hah! Slada Goy, hard as they come . . . *No,* you fool! You *mention* money, you'll be outlawed . . . You've no damn right to be ignorant of manners, sir." I've never seen Pop so slowed down. Even Mom's laid off him.

Dec. 1, 1987.

I'VE NEVER lived through such a grim month. Judy had lessons daily, and then I'd practice her. No bon. She was great in rehearsal, but in that Arena she'd freeze. She knew girls at school who'd been cut. She'd never been *really* hurt in her life, and got shivering sick just at the idea. It sure dulled her polish; and yet, she was more appealing to me, like when she was a brat and I'd pick her up when her Toddle Typhoon dumped.

It wasn't fair. Pop's a real hero-type adult to these Teeners. Was she supposed not to learn off him? And he'd never get touched.

Then this Slada's deputies came, big squaws with muscles in their calves, and tried to right-lane Mom because she's custom-built and they were trucks. But Mom had evidently boned up on Jehu law, and beat the time down from twelve to ten minutes, and fixed Judy's leather so she'd only have one arm exposed besides her cheek, and sent them off bow-legged. I felt real proud of Mom then.

But it wouldn't help Ju. Five minutes would be too much. And a week before the fight, she podded into my room in her bathrobe and plopped on my bed: "Oh Chuck, what'll I do-oo-oo? We'll be put off the road here too and Daddy'll be ruined. Bu-bu-but I *can't* fight that awful old woman. I couldn't even steer."

Well, I'd hoped for a break in the traffic; now I'd have to elbow one. I patted her shoulder: "Opey-dopey, kid, I'll fix it."

She grabbed me: "How? Daddy can't. Mr. Glash can't."

"I'm not much bigger'n you. In leathers, nobody'd know the difference. *I'll* fight her."

"Oh, but Chuckie, I beat you all the time at school."

"So who cares if *my* manly beauty gets marked?"

I bet we both slept well that

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night, for just about the first time in weeks.

BOTH our leathers had Pop's charging-quarterback insignia and Ju faked her 4 for my 3 on mine and fixed some of her slacks to fit me.

Came the day. I was to drive the whippet to the Arena, while the others followed in the car — Pop's real expert at getting deadline repairs done. So, I sneaked off in Ju's slacks, with makeup and a kerchief to hide my buzz-cut, and parked in the entrance tunnel to Defenders' End. And right on tick, Ju came out of Lady Defenders' Dressing Room and dodged around into the public Ladies' Room. I skulked after her. We took adjoining booths, and clothes came flying over the partition. And with three minutes to spare, we walked out again, one in slacks and one in leathers.

We still damped our mufflers —you never know who might be parked — but Ju threw her arms around me and kissed me on the open cheek. It made me feel pretty brave. Then she shooed me ahead.

I mounted and rolled into the arena. A pro mechanic-doctor came with me and checked my stirrups and ejector and stuff, and said good luck, and stood back. I'd cut things close, to avoid idle chat.

Then I really began to get Lepidoptera in the viscera. The far end looked five miles off with the stands curving around, and the enemy whippet toy-size — denture-pink and a red tornado on the panels. I'd watched outside Slada's house: She was mid-thirties but made up to look older, like mud on a moke's windshield, as if she had more to hide than she really did. That kind's always proving they're just as good as ever, which is bad. Another muscly dame. With swords or something, I might have felt different about fighting a woman. But this was like on the road where she'd ditch you to show her peerless skill. Maybe she was a moo-cow at home, but in a zoom her reality came out and you could drive her into a board with a hammer. So, I was going to do all I could to her — if any.

At the pistol, I sure gave my pro a dust-bath. I wanted to get Slada off balance. She was just flipping a cigarette butt — the old Nonchalant Flair like she'd do whipping in and out of lanes with a kid doin' Ben Hur on the seat beside her — when I was suddener than she'd expected. You know, when there's a gap two cars could pass in at a humble speed, and you just head for the middle? The other guy'll concede! So did Slada, and nearly dumped swerving. And I cleared

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the end wall by about two feet, and *her* pro jumped.

Well, she was madded up at being bluffed by any Young Gerl, and began to show her old-hand knowhow, to restore her confidence. She'd wear me (Judy) down till she could lay my (Judy's) face open good. (And it *could* have been Judy.) And she sure played rough.

STILL, I could read her far enough ahead to hold her off. And all the time, something was building up in me like those Civil War radio tubes that took hours to get hot. This stuff was great for guys like Pop. (Zowrrr, whacko.) Put 'em in here and let 'em slug it out. (Here she comes.) Or for old-time Indians and Vikings who'd kill anybody for kicks, including themselves. (Zgrrrrunch, whack-crack.) But when those types got too gay, people just abolished them. (Now what . . .?) So why should Judy get *her* arm crippled or her face ground in the sand? (Whoooom, oofie.) Or even *me*, dammit?

I'd planned just to steer and try to bull through. But suddenly it burst on me: In three minutes, she hadn't *nearly* touched me; and when I'd bluffed her at the start, she'd crumpled. (Watchit!) And *why* could I read her? (Vrooom, missed again.) 'Cause I could read Earth traffic, see? (No ya don't, sister.) These jokers trained for scientific hell. (Zwoooo, Brrrotherrr.) But *I'd* been trained dirty.

I wasn't so proud of it now. But this was the time for it if ever. (Grrrrup.) Show 'em how to *really* play Russian roulette, and if a dumb little punk like me was champ at it, where was the Glory?

So when she slowed on a turn, I timed her to a hair, zoom across her bumper (like beating the cross-traffic on a red). I'd have cut her too but she braked so hard she nearly went over her wheel and I only clunked her ka-whack across the helmet. But it sure shook her nerve again, and I got on her tail like a moke who can't decide to pass, and began clouting her, thunk, whap. Not sportin'? Who cared! To cut her cheek, I'd have had to pull level; but a whip stings and bruises even through leather. And I just glorified! I couldn't hate my own Pop, but I sure hated *her*. Show the kids how, huh?

Then I gave her the Technique. Foo! Any Grampaw driving to work with his mind on his dyspepsia, can do it by force of habit to score three car-lengths per block. She suddenly slowed to force me ahead, and I surged and cut in front of her, like beating a guy to a red light, and

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braked so she had to swing to pass *me,* and I clunked her. I snake-hipped her both sides. I crowded her from behind and when she swung away, there I was crowding her on the other side. It's amazing how much supremacy you can jam into a few minutes.

Only I forgot she wasn't a Regular or even a good old Earth moke. And sometimes these Jehuans go even Earth one better, when they're losing a fight, and do a kamikaze crash. So when she threw her whip away and opened her whippet out full, which is dangerous, I was too terrified to be scared. Geez guys! Those last two minutes were the longest hour I ever lived. We covered a good two miles in tight loops, I swear. Then, twenty seconds to go, she swung too tight, that gooey pink thing toppled, and the ejector threw her, all in one gasp. No time to brake. Left, right — I could just feel that I'd hit her whippet and crash; soft bump and snapping bones. I went between with my head and eyes scronched down.

I near rammed the wall before I realized neither crash nor bump had happened.

Marshals came tearing out, zrowww. But Slada was already rolling over. My muscles sort of melted: For once I'd gotten a closeup of how it'd feel to Get It — or Give It. But I hung on and drove slow to Defenders' End, just as the gate went up.

SOMEHOW, I'd never figured how to get *out* of that jam. People were helping me down, patting my back, pulling at my helmet. I bolted for the only possible cover, that Ladies' Dressing Room. I expected a riot, but nobody realized I was a Him. And in my state of mind, the scenery didn't matter. Then Mom grabbed me: "Darling! You're all *right?"* and started on the helmet. I had to bolt again, for the cubicle she'd come out of.

But she caught on fast, and I got another high-octane kiss all in the family. Hot coffee too. But she kept saying, "Now, from now on, Judy — I mean Chuck — no more of your father's nonsense. Now promise!"

Well, all I wanted was to sit with my hands between my knees, but finally I hove up: "Look, Mom, *I* don't *need* to promise. I'm sick of the adept stuff. Judy'll promise anything right now, but she'll get yippee-pills in her tank again because she's a born show-off. And as for Pop . . ." I just shrugged.

"Well, if your father isn't impressed now . . ."

I said, "Mom, the only cure for Pop is breaking his back or going where he can't drive."

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"Well, Chuckie, I *did* check, and there's a place called Bolgwalk where Plutomat wants a man, and they have no roads to speak of, just bogs."

Well, we both knew Pop'd never ride in any such back seat.

Just then, Judy burst in. She'd gotten by as "Miss Blaire's Sister". And as we switched clothes again, she reported that the fight had been a sensation. (She'd watched, though Mom wouldn't.) Half the audience was wild over the greatest daredevil show in history, and half was honking mad at my unsporting tactics and wanted Slada to rechallenge. (I bet!) Nuts and bolts to both halves.

Outside, Mom gave the old elbow to a mob of reporters: "Stand back, there. The girl's exhausted. You can call tomorrow."

And there, at the whippet, was Pop. All month he'd been sulking as if the whole deal were a plot to cramp his style. But now he had that quirk smirk like the guy in the ad: "Drive cautiously with our Triple-Threat Modern Storm-Trooperol."

The newshounds popped some bulbs, and he said, "Okay, keeds,

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you whisk along. I'll handle this."

Mom walked at him. "You'll handle nothing. Get along to the car."

He tempered: "What's this? I thought we'd celebrate for my famous daughter. So . . . you go home in an armored car if you like. Come on, Judy, you're a sport anyway. You and me, hey?"

But Ju was still scared, even if it was wearing off, and said "No!" in that spoiled-brat voice he always thought was so cute.

He sneered like when some moke elbows him in traffic, and swung away, beat us out to Spectator Parking, legged into the car like forking over his cayuse, whammed the door and roared the engine, all in one snappy action. He shot out of his stall with one deft whirl of the wheel, fixing to surge straight ahead out of the lot.

Maybe if he hadn't been so mad, even he would have seen the other car. But he felt it first, a crash that knocked his hat off. He and the other guy, with a passenger, charged out to inspect the slaughter.

Stumblebum had taken it on the rear bumper, but the side of the other looked like a discarded candy-wrapper. Well . . . Pop had hit *him*. The only good feature was that the other guy, though big, was gray-haired with a high complexion. Pop saw it too and, after they'd all asked couldn't they look where they were going, he began the old Road Lawyer line: "Well, now, Mister, this isn't an open street, y'know. How'm I to back blind with you crashing through full speed?"

The old guy went turkey-red; "Why, look where you hit me! I was half way past you, sir."

"All right. Challenge if you like. My little girl just made a monkey of a better fighter than you're likely to be."

The old guy went beet-red. On Jehu, if an old guy doesn't want to fight, he better drive real hum-

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ble. His jaw stuttered, then he grabbed for his fender, and slumped to the ground, and lay there grunting and not even pink.

A doc jumped to him. But the old guy's passenger grabbed Pop and jerked him around. He looked like a lumberjack foreman, curly black hair, black-shaved chin, hot black eyes. He snarled, "So now *I* flay you on behalf of my father, bigmouth."

Pop cased the guy's horsepower, and suddenly he looked all flabby. He did wrench his shoulder loose and try the hard-boiled comeback: "If your father can't keep his temper, *I'm* not liable by your code." (Like he says, what can you lose? And you often win.)

The guy pushed his face an inch from Pop's: "*Code?* Why you hog-trough oaf, twenty witnesses heard you insult him in a discussion of honor. They will strip your back and I, Slam Hollicker, will hack it to the bones. If you ever drive again, you will defer even to *old* men." He swung away without even bowing.

Pop was pinned there till they got old Hollicker into an ambulance and towed away his car. Then, Mom got in the driver's seat of our car, and Pop got in beside her without a peep, and Judy in the back. So I went for the whippet. It sure looks like we'll need *that.*

Planet Bolgwalk
Dec. 3, 1987.

ONLY we didn't do anything of the kind.

I didn't even pump Judy on what happened on that drive home; you owe your father *some* fenders to hide behind. But when I came in, Mom said, "Chuck, your father has taken a new job and we're translating again the day after tomorrow." So I went to borrow back some stuff and see some guys, but wondering why the overdrive.

Till I saw Pop. He'd been figuring the percentages.

Next day he was clearing up at his office. But he was home early fussing around like a pup in traffic, till the frame-building crew told him to go find a parking-deck. Then indoors, making sure nobody'd forgotten anything to hold us up come morning. Then out trying to bribe the crew to work overtime. Then, when they said the inspector wouldn't clear it till morning anyway, phoning the inspector to bribe *him.* Honest, I thought he'd boil his rad.

The old impetuous spirit got him down at crack of dawn, too, burning toast and eggs till Mom took the kitchen away from him. Which gained us three hours to stall around in while the crew finished the fence under his steely eye — though he didn't

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know any more about it than he does about a carburetor. But at half an hour to zero, Mr. Glash arrived and Pop got onto *his* rear bumper. They were out by the fence and Pop giving with the old Twenty Questions — why this, why that, with no break for answers — when up pranced this guy in a blue-and-white rig and hollered Pop's name aloud.

Pop winced. "Hey, tone it down. I can hear you. What's all this?"

The guy began reading a paper which boiled down to a demand that Pop desist from running out on his honorable duel. Pop looked like one of these guys who, when they get in a crash, jump out of the car and run. He grabbed Glash. "Hey, this clown can't stop me moving, can he?"

Glash drawled, "This 'clown' is Herald of the Courts of Honor. But, no, he can't stop your moving, as long as it's off Jehu."

Pop reinflated slightly. "Well, not that I want to welsh on an obligation. But Mrs. Blaire was so upset about the girl, and I had this offer. And you know how it is with big deals — split-second decisions."

Glash fluttered his eyelids. "Oh, yes, everyone knows. And as long as Hollicker feels he's run you off Jehu he'll be satisfied. But don't come back, even for a day for your firm, say. Not healthy."

The inspector arriving at last saved Pop answering *that* one.

Glash bowed with flourishes to Mom and Judy, and slightly to Pop. He drawled, "It's been, ah, interesting to know you, as a specimen of the, ah, Earth Regulars. I trust you find Bolgwalk congenial."

Then suddenly he turned to me. "From what I hear through, ah, a contact at the Arena, you'll make a man yet, Charles. Get some education — and get rid of the one you have. Good luck."

So we shook hands. Man!

But who saw through my game and didn't squeal?

FUNNY how Pop's adjusted to Bolgwalk; he fulfills his bullman ego by betting on the planetary whiffle-ball games. He usually loses but it's comparatively cheap. Judy could be on an asteroid, for all she cares now, if it had boys on it. No cars — but they make out. Mom treats me real man-to-man.

But now I've gotten over being a professional teener, I think I'll take Mr. Glash's advice. They say the High Vacuum Navy gives you wonderful training. And you can take chances in the line of duty . . . without scooping in civilians.

— CHANDLER ELLIOTT

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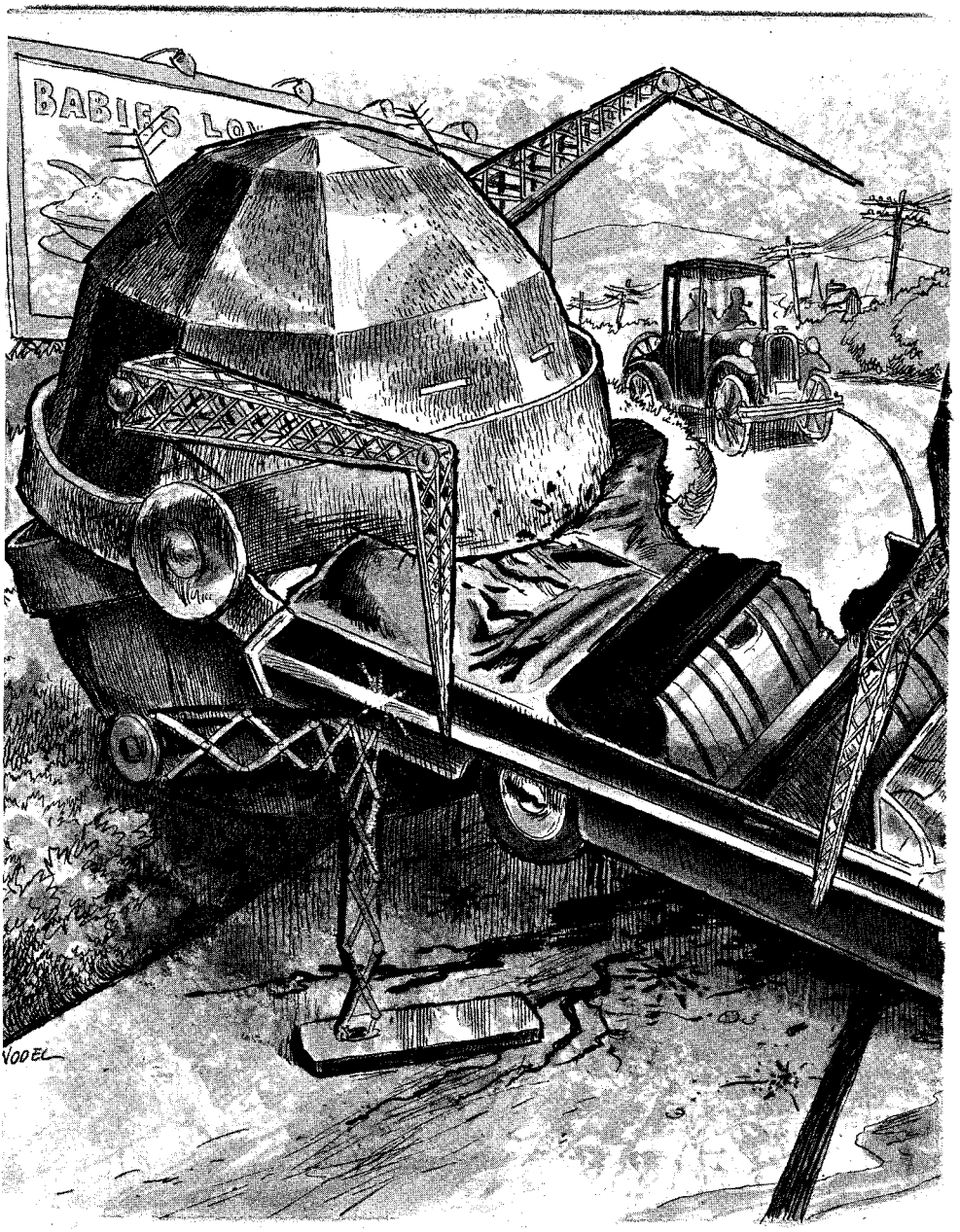

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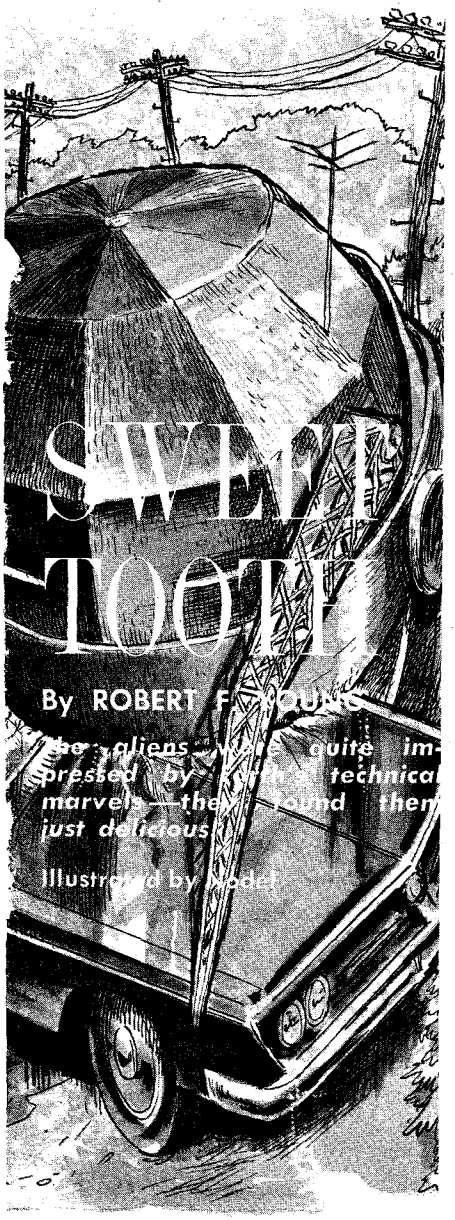

SWEET TOOTH

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

The aliens were quite impressed by Earth's technical marvels—they found them just delicious!

Illustrated by Model

SUGARDALE THREE miles, the state highway sign said. Dexter Foote turned into the side road that the arrow indicated.

He had no way of knowing it at the time, but by his action he condemned his new convertible to a fate worse than death.

The side road meandered down a long slope into a wooded hollow where a breeze born of cool bowers and shaded brooks made the July afternoon heat less oppressive. A quantity of the pique that had been with him ever since setting forth from the city departed. There were worse assignments, after all, than writing up a fallen star.

Abruptly he applied the brakes and brought the convertible to a screeching halt. His blue eyes started from his boyish face.

Well they might. The two Humpty Dumptyish creatures squatting in the middle of the road were as big as heavy tanks and, judging from their "skin tone," were constructed of similar material. They had arms like jointed cranes and legs like articulated girders. Their scissors-like mouths were slightly open, exposing maws the hue of an open hearth at tapping time. Either they were all body and no head, or all head and no body. Whichever was the case, they had both eyes and ears. The former had

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something of the aspect of peek holes in a furnace door, while the latter brought to mind lopsided TV antennae.

As Dexter watched, the foremost of the two metallic monsters advanced upon the convertible and began licking the chrome off the grill with a long, tong-like tongue. Meanwhile, its companion circled to the rear and took a big bite out of the trunk. There was an awesome CRUNCH! and the convertible gave a convulsive shudder.

At this point, Dexter got out and ran. More accurately, he jumped out and ran. A hundred feet down the road, he stopped and turned. He was just in time to see monster No. 1 bite off the right headlight. CRUNCH! Not to be outdone, monster No. 2 bit off the right taillight. CRUNCH-CRUNCH! An acrid odor affronted Dexter's nostrils, and he discerned a faint yellow haze hovering about the convertible. The rear wheels went in two bites. The 250 H.P. motor required three. CRUNCH-CRUNCH-CRUNCH! The upholstery caught fire and began to burn. A gout of flame shot up as the gas tank exploded. Far from discouraging the two monsters, the resultant inferno merely served to whet their appetities. CRUNCH-CRUNCH-CRUNCH-CRUNCH!

Dexter's shoulders sagged, and the spot next to his heart that the convertible had shared with his best girl gave a spasmodic twinge. Removing his suitcoat and slinging it over his shoulder, he turned his back on the grisly repast and set out sadly for Sugardale.

He had not gone far before his stalled thought-processes got into gear again.

THE FALLING star he had been assigned by his editor to write up had been an unusually brilliant one according to the report the paper had received. Maybe its unusualness did not stop there. Maybe it was something more than a mere meteorite. Certainly the two monsters could not be classified as local woodland creatures.

All of which was fine as far as copy was concerned. But it didn't bring his convertible back.

Presently he saw two sizable deposits of slag at the side of the road, and approaching them more closely, he discovered that they were still warm. Could they be the remains of a previously devoured automobile? he wondered. What an ignominious fate indeed to overtake a car! He looked at the two deposits once more before moving on. All he could think of were two piles of elephant dung.

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A mile and half later, he emerged in a small valley that sported a handful of houses, a scattering of business places, a church or two and a goodly number of trees. A roadside sign informed him that he had reached his destination, that its population was 350, and that its speed limit was 20 mph. The population, however, was nowhere in evidence, and the speed limit seemed silly in view of the absence of cars.

A scared-looking housewife, upon whose door he knocked, told him he'd probably find the local minion of the law at the Sugardale Inn, "sucking up beer the way he always is when he should be out earning his money." The Inn turned out to be a sagging three-story structure in desperate need of a paint-job. There was a model A sedan parked in front of it, the first automobile Dexter had seen. Formerly the establishment had provided a haven for weary travelers. Now it provided a haven for contented cockroaches. Its *fin de siècle* bar was a collector's item, and standing at it, one foot propped on the brass barrail, was a lone customer. He was tall and thin, and somewhere in his sixties, and he was wearing blue denim trousers and a blue chambray shirt. There was a lackluster badge pinned on the fading shirtfront, and a beat-up sombrero sat atop the graying head.

"Sheriff Jeremiah Smith at your service," he said calmly when Dexter dashed up to him. He took a sip from the schooner of beer that sat on the bar before him. "Got troubles, have you, young man?"

"My car," Dexter said. "I was driving along the road and —"

"Got ate up, did it? Well, it's not the first one to get ate up around here." Jeremiah Smith faced the doorway that led to the lobby. "Mrs. Creasy, get this young man a beer," he called.

A plump middle-aged woman whose dark hair fell down over her eyes like a thicket came into sight behind the bar. She flicked a cockroach off the drainboard with an expert forefinger, drew Dexter a schooner and set it before him. Jeremiah Smith paid for it. "Drink her down, young man," he said. "I know how *I'd* feel if *my* car got ate up."

Manfully, Dexter dispatched half the contents of the schooner, after which he introduced himself and explained the nature of his mission to Sugardale. "I never figured on anything like this, though," he concluded.

"You must have made it through just before the roadblock was set up," Jeremiah said. "You were lucky."

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Dexter started at him. "Lucky! I lost my *car*."

"Pshaw. What's a car to a newspaper man when a Big Story's in the air? Take this newspaper fellow I saw on TV Saturday night. He —"

"Big Stories went out long ago," Dexter said. "Newspapermen work for a living the same as anybody else. Get back to my car. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

Jeremiah looked hurt. "I've already done everything I can do. The minute I saw those tanks I knew it was a job for the army, and the state police agreed with me. So we notified them, after which we advised everybody to stay indoors and to keep their cars under lock and key. All we can do now is wait." Jeremiah sighed. "Crazy, if you ask me. Tanks eating automobiles!"

"I imagine," Dexter said thoughtfully, "that our diet would give them pause too. Where did this star of yours fall?"

"In Ed Hallam's north timber lot. Take you there, if you like. There's not much to see, though — just a big hole in the ground."

Dexter finished his beer. "Come on," he said.

THE MODEL A parked in front of the Inn turned out to be Jeremiah's. They took off down the road at a brisk pace, wound through woods, dales, pastures and fields. Dexter hadn't the remotest idea where he was when at last Jeremiah pulled up beside a grove larger and darker than the others.

The old man squinted into the lengthening shadows. "Seems to me them auto-eating tanks ought to make better reading than a common ordinary falling star."

Halfway out of the car, Dexter stared at him. "You mean to tell me you don't see the connection?"

"What connection?"

Dexter got the rest of the way out. "Between the automobile-eaters and the spaceship, of course."

Jeremiah stared at *him*. "What spaceship?"

"Oh, never mind," Dexter said. "Show me the fallen star."

It was in a clearing deep in the woods. Or rather, the crater-like hole it had made was. Peering down into the hole, Dexter saw the dark, pitted surface of what could very well have been an ordinary, if unusually large, meteorite. There was nothing that suggested an opening of any kind, but the opposite wall of the crater did look as though some heavy object had been dragged — or had dragged itself — up to the level of the clearing. The underbrush showed signs of hav-

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ing been badly trampled in the recent past.

He pointed out the signs to Jeremiah. "See how those saplings are flattened? No human being did that. I'll bet if we followed that trail, we'd come to the remains of the first car they consumed. Whose car was it, by the way?"

"Mrs. Hopkins's new Buick. She'd just started out for the city on one of her shopping trips. She was so scared when she came running back into town her hair was standing straight out behind her head. Maybe, though, it was because she was running so fast." Abruptly Jeremiah leaned forward and squinted at the ground. "Looks almost like a big footprint right there, don't it." He straightened. "But if the darn thing is a spaceship like you say, how come it buried itself?"

"Because whoever or whatever was piloting it didn't — or couldn't — decelerate enough for an orthodox landing," Dexter explained. "Lucky it hit the clearing. If it had hit the trees, you'd have had a forest fire on your hands."

Jeremiah looked worried. "Maybe we'd better be getting back to the road. I feel kind of guilty leaving my model A sitting there all alone."

Dexter followed him back through the woods and climbed into the front seat beside him. The road took them to the main highway, and not long thereafter Jeremiah turned off the highway into another road — a familiar road heralded by a familiar sign that said, SUGARDALE THREE MILES. Two slag deposits marked the spot where once Dexter's proud convertible had stood. He gazed at them sadly as they passed.

SUDDENLY Jeremiah brought the model A to a screeching halt. The two desecrators of the American Dream Incarnate were in the midst of another repast. The victim this time, judging from the still-visible star and the O.D. color scheme, was an army staff car. The grill and the motor were already gone, and half of the roof was missing. Yellow haze enshrouded the sorry scene, and the countryside was resounding to a series of horrendous CRUNCHES.

"Do you think if I sort of zoomed by, we could make it?" Jeremiah asked. "I hate to go all the way around the other way."

"I'm game if you are," Dexter said.

ZOOOOOOMMMMMMM!

The two monsters didn't even look up.

"You'd think my model A wasn't good enough for them," Jeremiah said peevishly.

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"Count your blessings. Look, there's someone up ahead."

The "someone" turned out to be a two-star general, a chicken colonel and an enlisted man. Jeremiah stopped, and the trio climbed into the back seat. "Ate your staff car, did they, General?" he chuckled, taking off again. "Well, that's the way it goes."

"The name," said the general, whose middleaged face had a greenish cast, "is General Longcombe, and I was on my way to Sugardale to reconnoiter the situation before committing any troops to the area. This is my aide, Colonel Mortby, and my driver, Sergeant Wilkins."

"Sheriff Smith at your service," said Jeremiah. "This here's Dexter Foote, who came to Sugardale to do a Big Story on our falling star."

"Tell me about these VEMs of yours, sheriff," General Longcombe said.

Jeremiah twisted around. "VEMs?"

" 'Vehicle-Eating Monsters'," Colonel Mortby interposed. He was a small man with a pleasant youthful face. "It's standard army operating procedure to give an object a name before investigating it."

"Oh." Jeremiah twisted back again, saved the model A from going into the ditch with a Herculean yank on the wheel. "Well, Dexter here seems to think that our falling star is a spaceship and that they landed in it, and I'm inclined to believe he's right."

"After seeing the VEMs in person, I'm inclined to believe he's right myself," Colonel Mortby said. "I think that what we have to do with here," he went on presently, when the general made no comment, "is a form of metal-based life capable of generating an internal temperature of at least three thousand degrees Fahrenheit. The acrid odor they give off while 'feasting' probably arises from a substance analogous to our gastric juices which their heat-resistant stomachs supply to accomplish 'digestion,' only in this case 'digestion' consists primarily in melting down the metal they consume and in isolating its waste matter, after which the pure metal is reprocessed into 'body tissue' and the waste matter is thrown off in the form of slag. I think we might go so far as to call them a couple of animate open hearths."

Dexter had turned around in the front seat and was looking at the colonel admiringly. "I think you've hit the nail right on the head, sir," he said.

General Longcombe was scowling. "We're here to survey the situation, Colonel, not to jump to conclusions." He addressed the

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back of Jeremiah's weather-beaten neck. "I trust we'll have no trouble finding suitable accommodations in Sugardale, sheriff."

"Mrs. Creasy'll be glad to put you up at the Inn, if that's what you mean," Jeremiah said.

MRS. CREASY was more than glad. Indeed, from the way she looked at the two officers and the NCO through her thicket of hair, you would have thought they were the first roomers she'd had in months, discounting the cockroaches, of course.

The general said petulantly, "Let's get down to business, Colonel. I want an armored company brought up immediately, and I want the fallen-star area put off limits at once. Have the sheriff show you where it is." He turned to Sergeant Wilkins. "Sergeant, get on the phone as soon as the colonel gets off it, and arrange for my personal Cadillac to be delivered here first thing."

After phoning his paper, Dexter headed for the dining room and sat down beside General Longcombe. "Anything new on the VEMs, General?" he asked.

General Longcombe sighed. There were shadows under his eyes, and his cheeks showed signs of sagging. "They're still in circulation. Scared the wits out of a couple of teenagers and ate their hot-rod. We've got them under constant surveillance, of course, and what with all the underbrush they trample it's easy enough to track them. But we can't stop them. They eat our gas grenades and our fragmentation grenades, and they're impervious to our tank killers and our antitank mines. A small A-bomb would take care of them nicely, but even assuming there's an area around here large enough and isolated enough to permit us to use an A-bomb, there's no way of herding them into it."

"It just so happens that there is such an area," Jeremiah Smith said. "Tillson Valley — about ten miles south of here. You'd have to vacate Old Man Tillson, of course, but he'd be glad to go if you made it worth his while. He hasn't grown a thing but weeds anyway since he got his pension. Just sits around all day and sucks up beer."

"But there's still no way of getting the VEMs out there," General Longcombe objected.

"Tell me, general," Dexter said, "have they eaten any of your jeeps or trucks or personnel carriers?"

General Longcombe shook his head. "They've had plenty of opportunity to, too."

"I have a theory," Dexter said.

The look that promptly settled on General Longcombe's face

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made no bones about what he thought of presumptuous young reporters with theories. Colonel Mortby, however, was considerably less biased. "It won't do any harm to listen to what he's got to say, sir," he pointed out, "and it may even do some good. It'll be at least a day before the ship is excavated and even then we may not know any more about the sort of life forms we're dealing with than we do now."

DEXTER NEEDED no further invitation. "I think it's pretty clear by now," he began, "that our two visitors from Planet X aren't attracted by metal in just any old form at all, but by metal in the form of new, or nearly new, automobiles. This strongly suggests that their landing was unpremeditated, because if it had been premeditated they would have come down in a section of the country where such metallic concoctions are in plentiful supply — near a city or a large town, or close to a heavily traveled throughway.

"But what is it about these new cars of ours that they find so irresistible? Let's try an analogy. Suppose that one of us has gone into a bakery to buy a birthday cake and that money is no object. Which cake is he most likely to buy? The answer is obvious: the one with the most visual appeal. To return to our visitors from Planet X. Suppose that all their lives they've been eating metal in various but uninspired ingot forms — the metallic equivalents, let's say, of beans and bread and hominy grits. Now suppose they find their way to another planet where visual appeal in metallic creation is a major occupation, and suppose that shortly after disembarking from their spaceship they come upon a new convertible. Wouldn't they react in the same way we would react if all our lives our diet had been confined to beans and bread and hominy grits and we traveled to another planet, disembarked and came upon a delicious birthday cake just begging to be eaten? Wouldn't they make pigs of themselves and start looking for more cakes?"

"But if it's the ornate nature of our late-model cars that attracts them, why did they eat the staff car?" Colonel Mortby asked. "And why did they eat the teenager's hot rod, and our gas and fragmentation grenades?"

"I suggest," Dexter said, "that they ate the staff car because at the moment there weren't any other cars immediately available. As for the teenager's hot rod, I imagine it was loaded down with enough chrome accessories to sink a battleship. And as for the grenades — your men threw

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them at them first, did they not?"

Colonel Mortby nodded. "I see what you mean. Sort of like throwing candy to a baby. I'll buy your theory, Mr. Foote."

"And now, if I may," Dexter continued, "I'd like to propose a means of getting rid of our unwanted visitors from Planet X."

General Longcombe sighed. "Very well, Mr. Foote. Go on."

"You mentioned earlier, sir, that there was no way of herding the VEMs into an isolated area. However, I think there is a way. Suppose we were to remove all of the automobiles from the vicinity with the exception of one, and suppose we were to park that one in the middle of Tillson Valley as bait, with a remote-controlled A-bomb underneath it?"

"But how would they know that the bait was there?"

"Through association," Dexter said. "All of the automobiles they've consumed thus far were in operation shortly before they began to eat them, so by now they must have established an unconscious relationship between the sound of the motors and the taste of the metal. Therefore, if we keep the bait idling and set up a P.A. system to amplify the sound, eventually they'll hear it, their mouths will salivate and they'll come running."

General Longcombe offered no comment. He appeared to be deep in thought.

"My car is in West Virginia," Colonel Mortby said.

"My car was eaten," Dexter said.

General Longcombe opened his mouth. "My car —" he began.

Sergeant Wilkins entered the room and saluted smartly. "The general's Cadillac has just arrived, sir," he said.

OLD MAN Tillson co-operated readily enough, once he was assured that he would be indemnified not only for his ramshackle house but for the young mountain of beer bottles that stood in his back yard, and the command post was moved forthwith to the lip of the valley. Jeremiah Smith was allowed to go along as an observer, and Dexter was accorded a similar favor. By evening, everything was in place. The colonel's Cadillac, parked in the valley's center, had something of the aspect of a chrome-bedizened lamb resting on an altar of crab grass, buttercups and mustard weeds. Surrounding it were half a dozen floodlights, suspended over it was a microphone, standing next to it was a pole supporting three P.A. speakers, and located several hundred feet away was a TV camera. Beyond this impres-

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sive display, Old Man Tillson's homestead could be discerned, and beyond the homestead rose his mountainous collection of beer bottles.

Colonel Mortby came out of the command-post tent and walked over to where Dexter and Jeremiah were standing, looking down into the valley. He handed each of them a pair of cobalt-blue glasses. "If you watch the blast, make sure you wear these," he said, raising his voice above the amplified purring of the Cadillac's motor. "You'll be glad to hear that the two VEMs are already on their way, Mr. Foote — our walkie-talkie squad just called in. However, the creatures move so slowly that they probably won't be here before dawn."

Dexter came out of a brown study. "One thing still bugs me," he said. "Why should two members of a race of extraterrestrials technically intelligent enough to build spaceships behave like a pair of gluttonous savages the minute they land on another planet?"

"But you explained that," Jeremiah pointed out. "They just can't resist eating American automobiles."

"I'm afraid I got carried away by my analogy. Civilized beings simply don't go running across the countryside the minute they land, and start grabbing up everything that strikes their eye. They make contact with the authorities first, and *then* they go running across the countryside and start grabbing up everything that strikes their eye."

Colonel Mortby grinned. "You've got a good point there, Mr. Foote. Well, I'm going to see if I can't grab forty winks or so — it's been a trying day."

"Me too," Jeremiah said, heading for his model A.

Left alone, Dexter wedged a flashlight in the fork of a little tree, sat down in its dim radiance, got out pen and notebook, and began his article. *The Solid Cheese Cadillac,* he wrote, *by Dexter Foote . . .*

Dawn found him dozing over page 16. "There they are!" someone shouted, jerking him awake. "The filthy fiends!"

The "someone" was General Longcombe. Joining him, Dexter saw the two VEMs. They were moving relentlessly across the valley floor toward the helpless Cadillac. Jeremiah came up, rubbing his eyes. Colonel Mortby could be discerned through the entrance of the command-post tent, leaning over a technician's shoulder.

The two VEMs reached the Cadillac and began licking off the chrome with their long, tong-like tongues. General Longcombe went wild. He waved his arms.

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"Monsters!" he screamed, "I'll blow you to Kingdom Come personally!" and stomped into the tent.

Dexter and Jeremiah started to put on their cobalt-blue glasses. Abruptly thunder sounded, and a shadow darkened the land. Looking skyward, Dexter saw it —

The ship. The saucer. Whichever word you cared to apply to it. But whichever noun you chose, you had to prefix it with the adjective "gigantic," for the ventral hatch alone, which had just yawned open, was large enough to accommodate the Sugardale Methodist Church.

In the command-post tent, the general, as yet unaware of the UFO's presence, was giving the countdown in an anguished voice. "Two —"

In the valley, the two VEMs were trying vainly to extricate themselves from a huge metallic net that had dropped over them.

"One —"

On the lip of the valley, Dexter Foote was grappling with an insight.

"Zero —"

Pfft! . . .

"IT WASN'T a dud after all," General Longcombe said. "They cancelled out the chain-reaction with some kind of a ray. I wonder . . ." He shook his head wistfully. "What a weapon, though."

He and Colonel Mortby and the tech were standing by the chrome-stripped carcass of the Cadillac. Dexter and Jeremiah had just come up. "My theory turned out to be a little bit off-center," Dexter said. "You see, I overlooked the possibility that our children aren't necessarily the only galactic small fry who run away from home and get themselves in Dutch. My birthday-cake analogy still holds true, but I would have done better to have compared our late-model automobiles to appetizing candy bars, or Easter baskets filled with jelly beans and chocolate chickens."

The general regarded him blankly. "I'm afraid I don't follow you at all, Mr. Foote."

"Did you ever turn a pair of hungry kids loose in a candy store, sir?"

Understanding came into General Longcombe's eyes then, and he turned and gazed sadly at his chromeless Cadillac. "I wonder if they have castor oil on Planet X," he said.

"I bet they have its equivalent," grinned Dexter Foote.

— ROBERT F. YOUNG

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His work was healing the sick — but this planet was already dead!

MED SHIP MAN

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrated by ENSH

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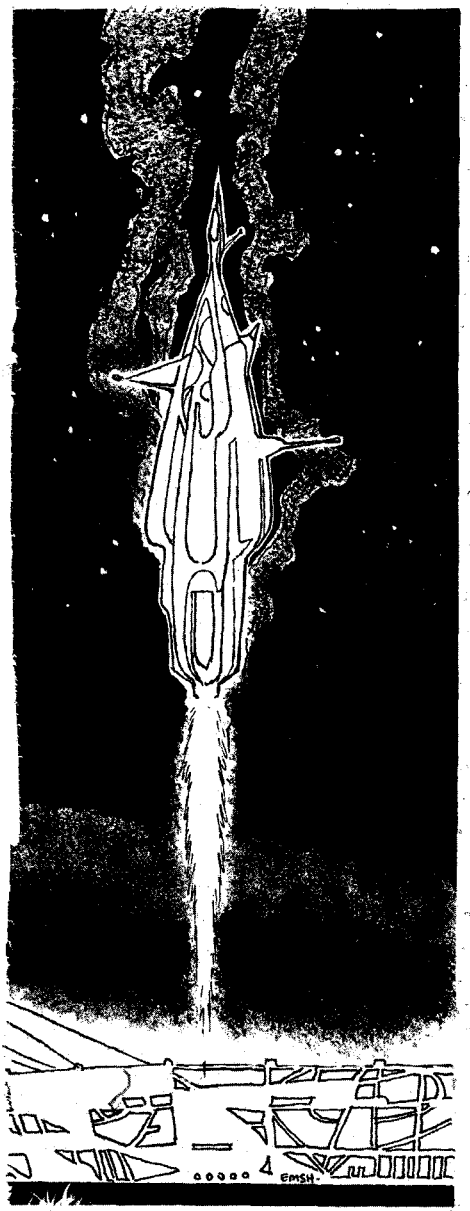

I

CALHOUN regarded the communicator with something like exasperation as his taped voice repeated a standard approach-call for the twentieth time. But no answer came, which had become irritating a long time ago. This was a new Med Service sector for Calhoun. He'd been assigned to another man's tour of duty because the other man had been taken down with romance. He'd gotten married, which ruled him out for Med Ship duty. So now Calhoun listened to his own voice endlessly repeating a call that should have been answered immediately.

Murgatroyd the *tormal* watched with beady, interested eyes. The planet Maya lay off to port of the Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty*. Its almost circular disk showed full size on a vision screen beside the ship's control board. The image was absolutely clear and vividly colored. There was an ice cap in view. There were continents. There were seas. The cloud system of a considerable cyclonic disturbance could be noted off at one side, and the continents looked reasonably as they should, and the seas were of that muddy, indescribable tint which indicates deep water.

Calhoun's own voice, taped an hour earlier, sounded in a speaker

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as it went again to the communicator and then to the extremely visible world a hundred thousand miles away.

"Calling ground," said Calhoun's recorded voice. *"Med Ship* Esclipus Twenty *calling ground to report arrival and ask coordinates for landing. Our mass is fifty standard tons. Repeat, five-oh tons. Purpose of landing, planetary health inspection."*

THE recorded voice stopped. There was silence except for the taped random noises which kept the inside of the ship from feeling like the inside of a tomb.

Murgatroyd said: *"Chee?"*

Calhoun said ironically, "Undoubtedly, Murgatroyd. Undoubtedly! Whoever's on duty at the spaceport stepped out for a moment, or dropped dead, or did something equally inconvenient. We have to wait until he gets back or somebody else takes over."

Murgatroyd said *"Chee!"* again and began to lick his whiskers. He knew that when Calhoun called on the communicator, another human voice should reply. Then there should be conversation, and shortly the force-fields of a landing-grid should take hold of the Med Ship and draw it planetward. In time it ought to touch ground in a spaceport with a gigantic, silvery landing-grid rising skyward all about it. Then there should be people greeting Calhoun cordially and welcoming Murgatroyd with smiles and petting.

"Calling ground," said the recorded voice yet again. *"Med Ship* Esclipus Twenty —"

It went on through the formal notice of arrival. Murgatroyd waited in pleasurable anticipation. When the Med Ship arrived at a port of call humans gave him sweets and cakes, and they thought it charming that he drank coffee just like a human, only with more gusto. Aground, Murgatroyd moved zestfully in society while Calhoun worked. Calhoun's work was conferences with planetary health officials, politely receiving such information as they thought important, and tactfully telling them about the most recent developments in medical science as known to the Interstellar Medical Service.

"Somebody," said Calhoun darkly, "is going to catch the devil for this!"

The communicator loudspeaker spoke abruptly.

"Calling Med Ship," said a voice. "Calling Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty!* Liner *Candida* calling. Have you had an answer from ground?"

Calhoun blinked. Then he said curtly:

"Not yet. I've been calling all

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of half an hour, and never a word out of them!"

"We've been in orbit twelve hours," said the voice from emptiness. "Calling all the while. No answer. We don't like it."

Calhoun flipped a switch that threw a vision screen into circuit with the ship's electron telescope. A starfield appeared and shifted wildly. Then a bright dot centered itself. He raised the magnification. The bright dot swelled and became a chubby commercial ship, with the false ports that passengers like to believe they looked through when in space. Two relatively large cargo ports on each side showed that it carried heavy freight in addition to passengers. It was one of those workhorse intra-cluster ships that distributed the freight and passengers the long-haul liners dumped off only at established transshipping ports.

Murgatroyd padded across the Med Ship's cabin and examined the image with a fine air of wisdom. It did not mean anything to him, but *formals* imitate human actions as parrots and parrakeets imitate human speech. He said, "*Chee!*" as if making an observation of profound significance, then went back to the cushion and again curled up.

"We don't see anything wrong aground," the liner's voice complained, "but they don't answer calls! We don't get any scatter-signals either. We went down to two diameters and couldn't pick up a thing. And we have a passenger to land. He insists on it!"

BY ordinary, communications between different places on a planet's surface use frequencies the ion-layers of the atmosphere either reflect or refract down past the horizon. But there is usually some small leakage to space, and line-of-sight frequencies are generally abundant. It is one of the annoyances of a ship coming in to port that space near most planets is usually full of local signals.

"I'll check," said Calhoun curtly. "Stand by."

The *Candida* would have arrived off Maya as the Med Ship had done, and called down as Calhoun had been doing. It was very probably a ship on schedule and the grid operator at the spaceport should have expected it. Space commerce was important to any planet, comparing more or less with the export-import business of an industrial nation in ancient times on Earth. Planets had elaborate traffic-aid systems for the cargo-carriers which moved between solar systems as they'd once moved between continents on Earth. Such traffic aids were very carefully maintained. Certainly for a spaceport landing-

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grid not to respond to calls for twelve hours running seemed ominous.

"We've been wondering," said the *Candida* querulously, "if there could be something radically wrong below. Sickness, for example."

The word "sickness" was a substitute for a more alarming word. But a plague had nearly wiped out the population of Dorset, once upon a time, and the first ships to arrive after it had broken out most incautiously went down to ground, and so carried the plague to their next two ports of call. Nowadays quarantine regulations were enforced very strictly indeed.

"I'll try to find out what's the matter," said Calhoun.

"We've got a passenger," repeated the *Candida* aggrievedly, "who insists that we land him by space-boat if we don't make a ship landing. He says he has important business aground."

Calhoun did not answer. The rights of passengers were extravagantly protected, these days. To fail to deliver a passenger to his destination entitled him to punitive damages which no spaceline could afford. So the Med Ship would seem heaven-sent to the *Candida's* skipper. Calhoun could relieve him of responsibility.

The telescope screen winked and showed the surface of the planet a hundred thousand miles away. Calhoun glared at the image on the port screen and guided the telescope to the spaceport city — Maya City. He saw highways and blocks of buildings. He saw the spaceport and its landing-grid. He could see no motion, of course.

He raised the magnification. He raised it again. Still no motion. He upped the magnification until the lattice-pattern of the telescope's amplifying crystal began to show. But at the ship's distance from the planet, a ground-car would represent only the fortieth of a second of arc. There was atmosphere, too, with thermals; anything the size of a ground-car simply couldn't be seen.

But the city showed quite clearly. Nothing massive had happened to it. No large-scale physical disaster had occurred. It simply did not answer calls from space.

CALHOUN FLIPPED off the screen.

"I think," he said irritably into the communicator microphone, "I suspect I'll have to make an emergency landing. It could be something as trivial as a power failure —" but he knew that was wildly improbable — "or it could be — anything. I'll land on rockets and tell you what I find."

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The voice from the *Candida* said hopefully:

"Can you authorize us to refuse to land our passenger for his own protection? He's raising the devil! He insists that his business demands that he be landed."

A word from Calhoun as a Med Service man would protect the spaceliner from a claim for damages. But Calhoun didn't like the look of things. He realized, distastefully, that he might find practically anything down below. He might find that he had to quarantine the planet and himself with it. In such a case he'd need the *Candida* to carry word of the quarantine to other planets and thus to Med Service sector headquarters.

"We've lost a lot of time," insisted the *Candida*. "Can you authorize us —"

"Not yet," said Calhoun. "I'll tell you when I land."

"But —"

"I'm signing off for the moment," said Calhoun. "Stand by."

He headed the little ship downward, and as it gathered velocity he went over the briefing sheets covering this particular world. He'd never touched ground here before. His occupation, of course, was seeing to the dissemination of medical science as it developed under the Med Service. The Service itself was neither political nor administrative. But it was important. Every human-occupied world was supposed to have a Med Ship visit at least once in four years to verify the state of public health.

Med Ship men like Calhoun offered advice on public-health problems. When something out of the ordinary turned up, the Med Service had a staff of researchers who hadn't been wholly baffled yet. There were great ships which could carry the ultimate in laboratory equipment and specialized personnel to any place where they were needed. Not less than a dozen inhabited worlds in this sector alone owed the survival of their populations to the Med Service, and the number of those which couldn't have been colonized without Med Service help was legion.

Calhoun reread the briefing. Maya was one of four planets in this general area whose life systems seemed to have had a common origin, suggesting that the Arrhenius theory of space-traveling spores was true in some limited sense. A genus of ground-cover plants with motile stems and leaves and cannibalistic tendencies was considered strong evidence of common origin.

The planet had been colonized for two centuries now, and produced organic compounds of great value from indigenous plants, most of which were used

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in textile manufacture. There were no local endemic infections to which men were susceptible. A number of human-use crops were grown. Cereals, grasses and grains, however, could not be grown because of the native ground-cover motile-stem plants. All wheat and cereal food had to be imported, which fact severely limited Maya's population. There were about two million people on the planet, settled on a peninsula in the Yucatan Sea and a small area of mainland. Public-health surveys had shown a great many things about a great many subjects . . . but there was no mention of anything to account for the failure of the spaceport to respond to arrival calls from space. Naturally!

The Med Ship drove on down, and the planet revolved beneath it.

As Maya's sunlit hemisphere enlarged, Calhoun kept the telescope's field wide. He saw cities, and vast areas of cleared land where native plants were grown as raw materials for the organics' manufacturies. He saw very little true chlorophyll green, though. Mayan foliage tended to a dark olive color.

AT FIFTY miles he was sure that the city streets were empty even of ground-car traffic. There was no spaceship aground in the landing-grid. There were no ground-cars in motion on the splendid, multiple-lane highways.

At thirty miles altitude there were still no signals in the atmosphere, though when he tried amplitude-modulation reception he picked up static. But there was no normally modulated signal on the air at any frequency. At twenty miles — no. At fifteen miles, broadcast power was available, which proved that the landing-grid was working as usual, tapping the upper atmosphere for electric charges to furnish power for all the planet's needs.

From ten miles down to ground-touch, Calhoun was busy.

It is not too difficult to land a ship on rockets, with reasonably level ground to land on. But landing at a specific spot is something else. Calhoun juggled the ship to descend inside the grid itself. His rockets burned out pencil-thin holes through the clay and stone beneath the tarmac. He cut them off.

Silence. Stillness. The Med Ship's outside microphones picked up small noises of wind blowing over the city. There was no other sound at all.

— No. There was a singularly deliberate clicking sound, not loud and not fast. Perhaps a click — a double click — every two seconds. That was all.

Calhoun went into the airlock,

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with Murgatroyd frisking a little in the expectation of great social success among the people of this world. When Calhoun cracked the outer airlock door he smelled something. It was a faintly sour, astringent odor that had the quality of decay in it. But it was no kind of decay he recognized. Again stillness and silence. No traffic-noise; not even the almost inaudible murmur that every city has in all its ways at all hours. The buildings looked as buildings should look at daybreak, except that the doors and windows were open. It was somehow shocking.

A ruined city is dramatic. An abandoned city is pathetic. This was neither. It was something new. It felt as if everybody had walked away, out of sight, within the past few minutes.

Calhoun headed for the spaceport building with Murgatroyd ambling puzzledly at his side. Murgatroyd was disturbed. There should be people here! They should welcome Calhoun and admire him — Murgatroyd — and he should be a social lion with all the sweets he could eat and all the coffee he could put into his expandable belly. But nothing happened! Nothing at all.

"*Chee?*" he asked anxiously.

"They've gone away," growled Calhoun. "They probably left in ground-cars. There's not one in sight."

There wasn't. Calhoun could look out through the grid foundations and see long, sunlit and absolutely empty streets. He arrived at the spaceport building. There was — there had been — a green area about the base of the structure. There was not a living plant left. Leaves were wilted and limp. The remains had become almost a jelly of collapsed stems and blossoms of dark olive-green. The plants were dead; but not long enough to have dried up. They might have wilted two or three days before.

Calhoun went in the building. The spaceport log lay open on a desk. It recorded the arrival of freight to be shipped away — undoubtedly — on the *Candida* now uneasily in orbit somewhere aloft. There was no sign of disorder. It was exactly as if the people here had walked out to look at something interesting, and hadn't come back.

Calhoun trudged out of the spaceport and to the streets and buildings of the city proper. It was incredible! Doors were opened or unlocked. Merchandise in the shops lay on display, exactly as it had been spread out to interest customers. There was no sign of confusion anywhere. Even in a restaurant there were dishes and flatware on the tables. The food in the plates was stale, as if three days old, but it hadn't

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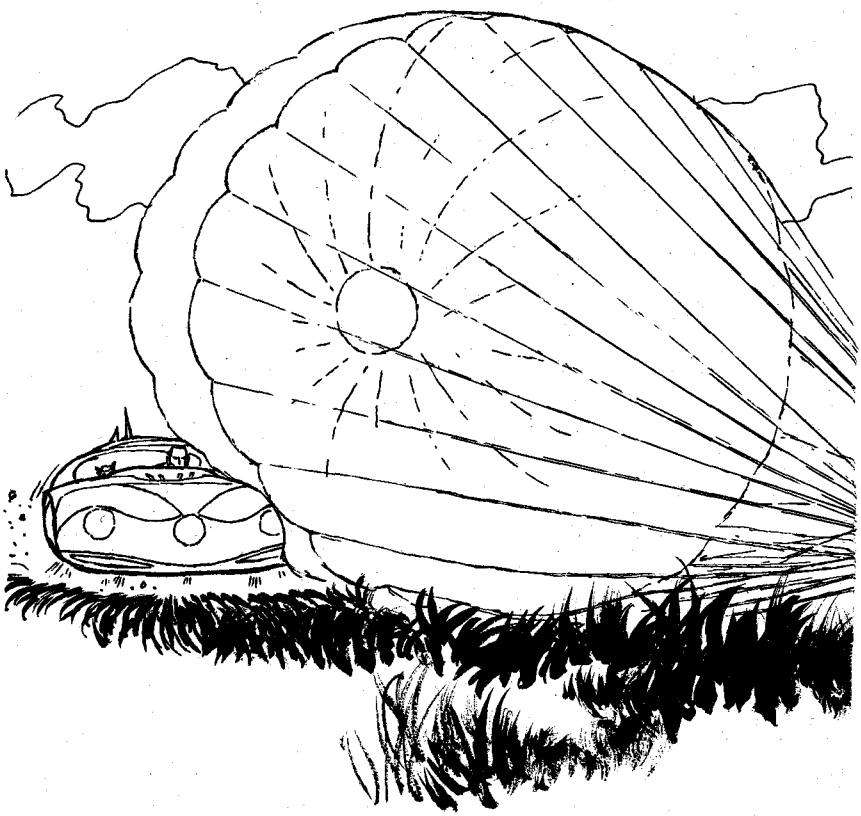

yet begun to spoil. The appearance of everything was as if people at their meals had simply, at some signal, gotten up and walked out without any panic or disturbance.

Calhoun made a wry face. He'd remembered something. Among the tales that had been carried from Earth to the other worlds of the galaxy there was a completely unimportant mystery story which people still sometimes tried to write an ending to. It was the story of an ancient sailing ship called the *Marie Celeste,* which was found drifting aimlessly in the middle of the ocean. There was food on the cabin table, and the galley stove was still warm. There was no sign of any trouble, or terror, or disturbance which might cause the ship to be abandoned. But there was not a

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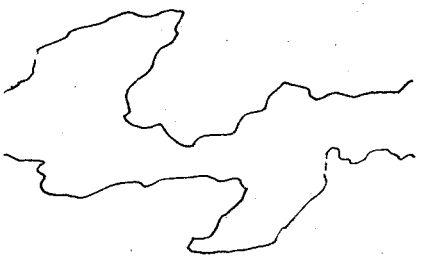

living soul on board. Nobody had ever been able to contrive a believable explanation.

"Only," said Calhoun to Murgatroyd, "this is on a larger scale. The people of this city walked out about three days ago, and didn't come back. Maybe all the people on the planet did the same, since there's not a communicator in operation anywhere. To make the understatement of the century, Murgatroyd, I don't like this. I don't like it a bit!"

II

ON THE way back to the Med Ship, Calhoun stopped at another place where, on a grass-growing planet, there would have been green sward. There were Earth-type trees, and some native ones, and between them there should have been a lawn. The trees were thriving, but the ground-cover plants were collapsed and rotting.

Calhoun picked up a bit of the semi-slime and smelled it. It was faintly sour, astringent, the same smell he'd noticed when he opened the airlock door. He threw the stuff away and brushed off his hands. Something had killed the ground-cover plants which had the habit of killing Earth-type grass when planted here.

He listened. Everywhere that humans live, there are insects and birds and other tiny creatures which are essential parts of the ecological system to which the human race is adjusted. They have to be carried to and established upon every new world that mankind hopes to occupy. But there was no sound of such living creatures here.

It was probable that the bellowing roar of the Med Ship's

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emergency rockets was the only real noise the city had heard since its people went away.

The stillness bothered Murgatroyd. He said, "*Chee!*" in a subdued tone and stayed close to Calhoun. Calhoun shook his head. Then he said abruptly:

"Come along, Murgatroyd!"

He went back to the building housing the grid controls. He didn't look at the spaceport log this time. He went to the instruments recording the second function of a landing-grid. In addition to lifting up and letting down ships of space, a landing-grid drew down power from the ions of the upper atmosphere and broadcast it. It provided all the energy that humans on a world could need. It was solar power, in a way, absorbed and stored by a layer of ions miles high, which then could be drawn on and distributed by the grid. During his descent Calhoun had noted that broadcast power was still available. Now he looked at what the instruments said.

The needle on the dial showing power-drain moved slowly back and forth. It was a rhythmic movement, going from maximum to minimum power-use, and then back again. Approximately six million kilowatts was being taken out of the broadcast every two seconds for half of one second. Then the drain cut off for a second and a half, and went on again for half a second.

Frowning, Calhoun raised his eyes to a very fine color photograph on the wall above the power dials. It was a picture of the human-occupied part of Maya, taken four thousand miles out in space. It had been enlarged to four feet by six, and Maya City could be seen as an irregular group of squares and triangles measuring a little more than half an inch by three-quarters. The detail was perfect. It was possible to see perfectly straight, infinitely thin lines moving out from the city. They were multiple-lane highways, mathematically straight from one city to another, and then mathematically straight — though at a new angle — until the next. Calhoun stared thoughtfully at them.

"The people left the city in a hurry," he told Murgatroyd, "and there was little confusion, if any. So they knew in advance that they might have to go. They were ready for it. If they took anything, they had it ready packed in their cars. But they hadn't been sure they'd have to go because they were going about their businesses as usual. All the shops were open and people were eating in restaurants, and so on."

Murgatroyd said, "*Chee!*" as if in full agreement.

"Now," demanded Calhoun,

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"where did they go? The question's really where could they go! There were about eight hundred thousand people in this city. There'd be cars for everyone, of course, and two hundred thousand cars would take everybody. But that's a lot of ground-cars! Put 'em two hundred feet apart on a highway, and that's twenty-six cars to the mile on each lane. Run them at a hundred miles an hour on a twelve-lane road — using all lanes one way — and that's twenty-six hundred cars per lane per hour, and that's thirty-one thousand . . . two highways make sixty-two . . . three highways . . . With two highways they could empty the city in under three hours, and with three highways close to two. Since there's no sign of panic, that's what they must have done. Must have worked it out in advance, too. Maybe they'd done it before it happened . . . whatever it was that happened."

HE searched the photograph which was so much more detailed than a map. There were mountains to the north of Maya City, but only one highway led north. There were more mountains to the west. One highway went into them, but not through. To the south there was sea, which curved around some three hundred miles from Maya City and put the human colony on Maya on a peninsula.

"They went east," said Calhoun presently. He traced lines with his finger. "Three highways go east; that's the only way they could go quickly. They hadn't been sure they'd have to go but they knew where to go when they did. So when they got their warning, they left. On three highways, to the east. And we'll follow them and ask what the hell they ran away from. Nothing's visible here!"

He went back to the Med Ship, Murgatroyd skipping with him.

As the airlock door closed behind them, he heard a click from the outside-microphone speakers. He listened. It was a doubled clicking, as of something turned on and almost at once turned off again. There was a two-second cycle, the same as that of the power drain. Something drawing six million kilowatts went on and immediately off again every two seconds. It made a sound in speakers linked to outside microphones, but it didn't make a noise in the air. The microphone clicks were induction; pick-up; like cross-talk on defective telephone cables.

Calhoun shrugged his shoulders almost up to his ears. He went to the communicator.

"Calling *Candida* —" he began,

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and the answer almost leaped down his throat.

"*Candida* to Med Ship. Come in! Come in! What's happened down there?"

"The city's deserted without any sign of panic," said Calhoun, "and there's power and nothing seems to be broken down. But it's as if somebody had said, 'Everybody clear out' and they did. That doesn't happen on a whim! What's your next port of call?"

The *Candida's* voice told him, hopefully.

"Take a report," commanded Calhoun. "Deliver it to the public health office immediately you land. They'll get it to Med Service sector headquarters. I'm going to stay here and find out what's been going on."

He dictated, growing irritated as he did so because he couldn't explain what he reported. Something serious had taken place, but there was no clue as to what it was. Strictly speaking, it wasn't certainly a public health affair. But any emergency the size of this one involved public health factors.

"I'm remaining aground to investigate," finished Calhoun. "I will report further when or if it is possible. Message ends."

"What about our passenger?"

"To the devil with your passenger!" said Calhoun peevishly. "Do as you please!"

HE CUT off the communicator and prepared for activity outside the ship. Presently he and Murgatroyd went to look for transportation. The Med Ship couldn't be used for a search operation; it didn't carry enough rocket fuel. They'd have to use a ground vehicle.

It was again shocking to note that nothing had moved but sun shadows. Again it seemed that everybody had simply walked out of some door or other and failed to come back. Calhoun saw the windows of jewelers' shops. Treasures lay unguarded in plain view. He saw a florist's shop. Here there were earth-type flowers apparently thriving, and some strange beautiful flowers with olive-green foliage which throve as well as the Earth-plants. There was a cage in which a plant had grown, and that plant was wilting and about to rot. But a plant that had to be grown in a cage . . .

He found a ground-car agency, perhaps for imported cars, perhaps for those built on Maya. He went in and from the cars on display he chose one, an elaborate sports car. He turned its key and it hummed. He drove it carefully out into the empty street, Murgatroyd sitting interestedly beside him.

"This is luxury, Murgatroyd," said Calhoun. "Also it's grand

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theft. We medical characters can't usually afford such things. Or have an excuse to steal them. But these are parlous times, so we take a chance."

"*Chee!*" said Murgatroyd.

"We want to find a fugitive population and ask what they ran away from. As of the moment, it seems that they ran away from nothing. They may be pleased to know they can come back."

Murgatroyd again said, "*Chee!*"

Calhoun drove through vacant ways. It was somehow nerve-racking. He felt as if someone should pop out and say "Boo!" at any instant. He discovered an elevated highway and a ramp leading up to it. At a cloverleaf he drove eastward, watching sharply for any sign of life. There was none.

He was nearly out of the city when he felt the chest impact of a sonic boom, and then heard a trailing away growling sound which seemed to come from farther away as it died out. It was the result of something traveling faster than sound, so that the noise it made far away had to catch up with the sound it emitted nearby.

He stared up. He saw a parachute blossom as a bare speck against the blue. Then he heard the even deeper-toned roaring of a supersonic craft climbing skyward. It could be a spaceliner's lifeboat, descended into atmosphere and going out again.

It was. It had left a parachute behind, and now went back to space to rendezvous with its parent ship.

"That," said Calhoun impatiently, "will be the *Candida's* passenger. He was insistent enough."

He scowled. The *Candida's* voice had said its passenger demanded to be landed for business reasons. And Calhoun had a prejudice against some kinds of business men who would think their own affairs more important than anything else. Two standard years before, he'd made a planetary health inspection on Texia II, in another galactic sector. It was a llano planet and a single giant business enterprise. Illimitable prairies had been sown with an Earth-type grass which destroyed the native ground-cover —the reverse of the ground-cover situation here — and the entire planet was a monstrous range for beef cattle. Dotted about were gigantic slaughterhouses, and cattle in masses of tens of thousands were shifted here and there by ground-induction fields which acted as fences. Ultimately the cattle were driven by these same induction fences to the slaughter houses and actually into the chutes where their throats were slit. Every imaginable fraction of a credit of profit was extracted

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from their carcasses, and Calhoun had found it appalling.

He was not sentimental about cattle, but the complete cold-bloodedness of the entire operation sickened him. The same cold-bloodedness was practised toward the human employees who ran the place. Their living quarters were sub-marginal. The air stank of cattle murder. Men worked for the Texia Company or they did not work. If they did not work they did not eat. If they worked and ate, — Calhoun could see nothing satisfying in being alive on a world like that! His report to Med Service had been biting. He'd been prejudiced against businessmen ever since.

BUT A parachute descended, blowing away from the city. It would land not too far from the highway he followed. And it didn't occur to Calhoun not to help the unknown chutist. He saw a small figure dangling below the chute. He slowed the ground-car as he estimated where the parachute would land.

He was off the twelve-lane highway and on a feeder road when the chute was a hundred feet high. He was racing across a field of olive-green plants that went all the way to the horizon when the parachute actually touched ground. There was a considerable wind. The man in the harness bounced. He didn't know how to spill the air. The chute dragged him.

Calhoun sped ahead, swerved and ran into the chute. He stopped the car and the chute stopped with it. He got out.

The man lay in a hopeless tangle of cordage. He thrust unskilfully at it. When Calhoun came up he said suspiciously:

"Have you a knife?"

Calhoun offered a knife, politely opening its blade. The man slashed at the cords and freed himself. There was an attache case lashed to his chute harness. He cut at those cords. The attache case not only came clear, but opened. It dumped out an incredible mass of brand new, tightly packed interstellar credit certificates. Calhoun could see that the denominations were one thousand and ten thousand credits. The man from the chute reached under his armpit and drew out a blaster.

It was not a service weapon. It was elaborate, practically a toy. With a dour glance at Calhoun he put it in a side pocket and gathered up the scattered money. It was an enormous sum, but he packed it back. He stood up.

"My name is Allison," he said in an authoritative voice. "Arthur Allison. I'm much obliged. Now I'll ask you to take me to Maya City."

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"No," said Calhoun politely. "I just left there. It's deserted. I'm not going back. There's nobody there."

"But I've important bus —" The other man stared. "It's deserted? But that's impossible!"

"Quite," agreed Calhoun, "but it's true. It's abandoned. Uninhabited. Everybody's left it. There's no one there at all."

The man who called himself Allison blinked unbelievingly. He swore. Then he raged profanely.

But he was not bewildered by the news. Which, upon consideration, was itself almost bewildering. But then his eyes grew shrewd. He looked about him.

"My name is Allison," he repeated, as if there were some sort of magic in the word. "Arthur Allison. No matter what's happened, I've some business to do here. Where have the people gone? I need to find them."

"I need to find them too," said Calhoun. "I'll take you with me, if you like."

"You've heard of me." It was a statement, confidently made.

"Never," said Calhoun politely. "If you're not hurt, suppose you get in the car? I'm as anxious as you are to find out what's happened. I'm Med Service."

ALLISON MOVED toward the car.

"Med Service, eh? I don't think much of the Med Service! You people try to meddle in things that are none of your business!"

Calhoun did not answer. The muddy man, clutching the attache case tightly, waded through the olive-green plants to the car and climbed in. Murgatroyd said cordially, "*Chee-chee*!" but Allison viewed him with distaste.

"What's this?"

"He's Murgatroyd," said Calhoun. "He's a *tormal*. He's Med service personnel."

"I don't like beasts," said Allison coldly.

"He's much more important to me than you are," said Calhoun, "if the matter should come to a test."

Allison stared at him as if expecting him to cringe. Calhoun did not. Allison showed every sign of being an important man who expected his importance to be recognized and catered to. When Calhoun stirred impatiently he got into the car and growled a little. Calhoun took his place. The ground-car hummed. It rose on the six columns of air which took the place of wheels and slid across the field of dark-green plants, leaving the parachute deflated across a number of rows, and a trail of crushed-down plants where it had moved.

It reached the highway again. Calhoun ran the car up on the highway's shoulder, and then sud-

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denly checked. He'd noticed something.

He stopped the car and got out. Where the ploughed field ended, and before the coated surface of the highway began, there was a space where on another world one would expect to see green grass.

On this planet grass did not grow; but there would normally be some sort of self-planted vegetation where there was soil and sunshine and moisture. There had been such vegetation here, but now there was only a thin, repellent mass of slimy and decaying foliage. Calhoun bent down to it.

It had a sour, faintly astringent smell of decay. These were the ground-cover plants of Maya of which Calhoun had read. They had motile stems, leaves and flowers, and they had cannibalistic tendencies. They were the local weeds which made it impossible to grow grain for human use upon this world.

And they were dead.

Calhoun straightened up and returned to the car. Plants like this were wilted at the base of the spaceport building, and on another place where there should have been sward. Calhoun had seen a large dead member of the genus in a florist's, that had been growing in a cage before it died. There was a singular coincidence here: humans ran away from something, and something caused the death of a particular genus of cannibal weeds.

It did not exactly add up to anything in particular, and certainly wasn't evidence for anything at all. But Calhoun drove on in a vaguely puzzled mood. The germ of a guess was forming in his mind. He couldn't pretend to himself that it was likely, but it was surely no more unlikely than most of a million human beings abandoning their homes at a moment's notice.

III

THEY came to the turnoff for a town called Tenochitlan, some forty miles from Maya City. Calhoun swung off the highway to go through it.

Whoever had chosen the name Maya for this planet had been interested in the legends of Yucatan, back on Earth. There were many instances of such hobbies in a Med Ship's list of ports of call. Calhoun touched ground regularly on planets that had been named for countries and towns when men first roamed the stars, and nostalgically christened their discoveries with names suggested by homesickness. There was a Tralee, and a Dorset, and an Eire. Colonists not infrequently took their world's given name as a pattern and chose related names for seas and peninsulas and mountain

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chains. On Texia the landing-grid rose near a town called Corral and the principal meat-packing settlement was named Roundup.

Whatever the name Tenochitlan would have suggested, though, was denied by the town itself. It was a small, with a pleasing local type of architecture. There were shops and some factories, and many strictly private homes, some clustered close together and others in the middles of considerable gardens. In those gardens also there was wilt and decay among the cannibal plants. There was no grass, because the plants prevented it, but now the motile plants themselves were dead. Except for the one class of killed growing things, however, vegetation was luxuriant.

But the little city was deserted. Its streets were empty, its houses untenanted. Some houses were apparently locked up here, though, and Calhoun saw three or four shops whose stock in trade had been covered over before the owners departed. He guessed that either this town had been warned earlier than the spaceport city, or else they knew they had time to get in motion before the highways were filled with the cars from the west.

Allison looked at the houses with keen, evaluating eyes. He did not seem to notice the absence of people. When Calhoun swung back on the great road beyond the little city, Allison regarded the endless fields of dark-green plants with much the same sort of interest.

"Interesting," he said abruptly when Tenochitlan fell behind and dwindled to a speck. "Very interesting! I'm interested in land. Real property, that's my business. I've a land-owning corporation on Thanet Three. I've some holdings on Dorset, too, and elsewhere. It just occurred to me: what's all this land and the cities worth, with the people all run away?"

"What," asked Calhoun, "are the people worth who've run?"

Allison paid no attention. He looked shrewd. Thoughtful.

"I came here to buy land," he said. "I'd arranged to buy some hundreds of square miles. I'd buy more if the price were right. But — as things are, it looks like the price of land ought to go down quite a bit. Quite a bit!"

"It depends," said Calhoun, "on whether there's anybody left alive to sell it to you, and what sort of thing has happened."

Allison looked at him sharply.

"Ridiculous!" he said authoritatively. "There's no question of their being alive!"

"They thought there might be," observed Calhoun. "That's why they ran away. They hoped they'd be safe where they ran to. I hope they are."

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Allison ignored the comment. His eyes remained intent and shrewd. He was not bewildered by the flight of the people of Maya. His mind was busy with contemplation of that flight from the standpoint of a man of business.

THE CAR went racing onward. The endless fields of dark green rushed past to the rear. The highway was deserted, just three strips of surfaced road, mathematically straight, going on to the horizon. They went on by tens and scores of miles, each strip wide enough to allow four ground-cars to run side by side. The highway was intended to allow all the produce of all these fields to be taken to market or a processing plant at the highest possible speed and in any imaginable quantity. The same roads had allowed the cities to be deserted instantly the warning — whatever the warning was — arrived.

Fifty miles beyond Tenochitlan there was a mile-long strip of sheds containing agricultural machinery for crop culture and trucks to carry the crops to market. There was no sign of life about the machinery, nor in a further hour's run to westward.

Then there was a city visible to the left. But it was not served by this particular highway, but another. There was no sign of any movement in its streets. It moved along the horizon to the left and rear. Presently it disappeared.

Half an hour later still, Murgatroyd said:

"Chee!"

He stirred uneasily. A moment later he said *"Chee!"* again.

Calhoun turned his eyes from the road. Murgatroyd looked unhappy. Calhoun ran his hand over the *formal's* furry body. Murgatroyd pressed against him. The car raced on. Murgatroyd whimpered a little. Calhoun's hand felt the little animal's muscles tense sharply, and then relax, and after a little tense again. Murgatroyd said almost hysterically:

"Chee-chee-chee-chee!"

Calhoun stopped the car, but Murgatroyd did not seem to be relieved. Allison said impatiently, "What's the matter?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," said Calhoun.

He felt Murgatroyd's pulse. The role of Murgatroyd in the Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty* was not only that of charming companion in the long, isolated runs in overdrive. Murgatroyd was a part of the Med Service. His tribe had been discovered on a planet in the Deneb sector, and men had made pets of them, to the high satisfaction of the *formals*. Presently it was discovered that vet-

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erinarians never had *tormals* for patients. They were invariably in robustuous good health. They contracted no infections from other animals; they shared no infections with anybody else. The Med Service discovered that *tormals* possessed a dynamic immunity to germ and bacteria-caused diseases. Even viruses injected into their bloodstreams only provoked an immediate, overwhelming development of antibodies, so that *tormals* couldn't be given any known disease. Which was of infinite value to the Med Service.

Now every Med Ship that could be supplied with a *tormal* carried a small, affectionate, whiskered member of the tribe. Men liked them, and they adored men. And when, as sometimes happened, by mutation or the simple enmity of nature, a new kind of infection appeared in human society — why — *tormals* defeated it. They produced specific antibodies to destroy it. Men analyzed the antibodies and synthesized them, and they were available to all the humans who needed them. So a great many millions of humans stayed alive, because *tormals* were pleasant little animals with a precious genetic gift of good health.

CALHOUN LOOKED AT his sweep-second watch, timing the muscular spasms that Murgatroyd displayed. They coincided with irregularities in Murgatroyd's heartbeat, coming at approximately two-second intervals. The tautening of the muscles lasted just about half a second.

"But I don't feel it!" said Calhoun.

Murgatroyd whimpered again and said, *"Chee-chee!"*

"What's going on?" demanded Allison with the impatience of a very important man indeed. "If the beast's sick, he's sick! I've got to find — "

Calhoun opened his med kit and went carefully through it until he found what he needed. He put a pill into Murgatroyd's mouth.

"Swallow it!" he commanded.

Murgatroyd resisted, but the pill went down. Calhoun watched him sharply. Murgatroyd's digestive system was delicate, but it was dependable. Anything that might be poisonous, Murgatroyd's stomach rejected instantly and emphatically.

The pill stayed down.

"Look!" said Allison indignantly. "I've got business to do! In this attache case I have millions of interstellar credits, in cash, to pay down on purchases of land and factories. I ought to make some damned good deals! And I figure that that's as important as anything else you can think of! It's a damned sight more impor-

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tant than a beast with a belly-ache!"

Calhoun looked at him coldly. "Do you own land on Texia?" he asked.

Allison's mouth dropped open. Extreme suspicion and unease appeared on his face. As a sign of the unease, his hand went to the side coat pocket in which he'd put a blaster. He didn't pluck it out. Calhoun's left fist swung around and landed. He took Allison's elaborate pocket blaster and threw it away among the monotonous rows of olive-green plants. He returned to absorbed observation of Murgatroyd.

In five minutes the muscular spasms diminished. In ten, Murgatroyd frisked. But he seemed to think that Calhoun had done something remarkable. In the warmest of tones he said:

"Chee!"

"Very good," said Calhoun. "We'll go ahead. I suspect you'll do as well as we do — for a while."

The car lifted the few inches the air columns sustained it above the ground. It went on, still to the eastward. But Calhoun drove more slowly now.

"Something was giving Murgatroyd rhythmic muscular spasms," he said coldly. "I gave him medication to stop them. He's more sensitive than we are, so he reacted to a stimulus we haven't noticed yet. But I think we'll notice it presently."

Allison seemed to be dazed at the affront given him. It appeared to be unthinkable that anybody might lay hands on him.

"What the devil has that to do with me?" he demanded angrily. "And what did you hit me for? You're going to pay for this!"

"Until I do," Calhoun told him, "you'll be quiet. And it does have the devil to do with you. There was a Med Service gadget once — a tricky little device to produce contraction of chosen muscles. It was useful for re-starting stopped hearts without the need of an operation. It regulated the beat of hearts that were too slow or dangerously irregular. But some businessman had a bright idea and got a tame researcher to link that gadget to ground induction currents. I suspect you know that businessman!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," snapped Allison. But he was singularly tense.

"I do," said Calhoun unpleasantly. "I made a public health inspection on Texia a couple of years ago. The whole planet is a single, gigantic, cattle-raising enterprise. They don't use metal fences — the herds are too big to be stopped by such things. They don't use cowboys — they cost money. On Texia they use ground-induction and the Med

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Service gadget linked together to serve as cattle fences. They act like fences, though they're projected through the ground. Cattle become uncomfortable when they try to cross them. So they draw back. So men control them. They move them from place to place by changing the cattle fences, which are currents induced in the ground. The cattle have to keep moving or be punished by the moving fence. They're even driven into the slaughterhouse chutes by ground-induction fields! That's the trick on Texia, where induction fields herd cattle. I think it's the trick on Maya, where people are herded like cattle and driven out of their cities so the value of their fields and factories will drop, — so a land buyer can find bargains!"

"You're insane!" snapped Allison. "I just landed on this planet! You saw me land! I don't know what happened before I got here! How could I?"

"You might have arranged it," said Calhoun.

ALLISON assumed an air of offended and superior dignity. Calhoun drove the car onward at very much less than the headlong pace he'd been keeping to. Presently he looked down at his hands on the steering wheel. Now and then the tendons to his fingers seemed to twitch. At rhythmic intervals, the skin crawled on the back of his hands. He glanced at Allison. Allison's hands were tightly clenched.

"There's a ground-induction fence in action, all right," said Calhoun calmly. "You notice? It's a cattle fence and we're running into it. If we were cattle, now, we'd turn around and move away."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" said Allison.

But his hands stayed clenched. Calhoun slowed the car still more. He began to feel, all over his body, that every muscle tended to twitch at the same time. It was a horrible sensation. His heart muscles tended to contract too, simultaneously with the rest, but one's heart has its own beat rate. Sometimes the normal beat coincided with the twitch. Then his heart pounded violently — so violently that it was painful. But equally often the imposed contraction of the heart muscles came just after a normal contraction, and then it stayed tightly knotted for half a second. It missed a beat, and the feeling was agony.

No animal would have pressed forward in the face of such sensations. It would have turned back long ago. No animal. Not even Man.

Calhoun stopped the car. He looked at Murgatroyd. Murga-

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troyd was completely himself. He looked inquiringly at Calhoun. Calhoun nodded to him, but he spoke — with some difficulty — to Allison.

"We'll see — if this thing — builds up. You know that it's the Texia — trick. A ground — induction unit set up — here. It drove people — like cattle. Now we've — run into it. — It's holding people — like cattle."

He panted. His chest muscles contracted with the rest, so that his breathing was interfered with. But Murgatroyd, who'd been made uneasy and uncomfortable before Calhoun noticed anything wrong, was now bright and frisky. Medication had desensitized his muscles to outside stimuli. He would be able to take a considerable electric shock without responding to it.

But he could be killed by one that was strong enough.

A savage anger filled Calhoun. Everything fitted together. Allison had put his hand convenient to his blaster when Calhoun mentioned Texia. It meant that Calhoun suspected what Allison knew to be true. A cattle-fence unit had been set up on Maya, and it was holding — like cattle — the people it had previously driven — like cattle. Calhoun could deduce with some precision exactly what had been done. The first experience of Maya with the cattle fence would have been very mild. It would have been low-power, causing just enough uneasiness to be noticed. It would have moved from west to east, slowly, and it would have reached a certain spot and there faded out. And it would have been a mystery and an uncomfortable thing, and nobody would understand it on Maya. In a week it would almost be forgotten. But then there'd come a stronger disturbance. And it would travel like the first one; down the length of the peninsula on which the colony lay, but stopping at the same spot as before, and then fading away to nothingness. And this also would have seemed mysterious. But nobody would suspect humans of causing it. There would be theorizing and much questioning, but it would be considered an unfamiliar natural event.

Probably the third use of the cattle fence would be most disturbing. This time it would be acutely painful. But it would move into the cities and through them and past them, and it would go down the peninsula to where it had stopped and faded on two previous occasions.

The people of Maya would be disturbed and scared. But they considered that they knew it began to the westward of Maya City, and moved toward the east

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at such-and-such a speed, and it went so far and no farther. And they would organize themselves to apply this carefully worked out information.

It would not occur to any of them that they had learned how to be driven like cattle.

CALHOUN, of course, could only reason that this must have happened. But nothing else could have taken place. Perhaps there were more than three uses of the moving cattle fence to get the people prepared to move past the known place at which it always faded to nothingness. They might have been days apart, or weeks apart, or months. There might have been stronger manifestations followed by weaker ones and then stronger ones again.

But there was an inductive cattle fence across the highway here. Calhoun had driven into it. Every two seconds the muscles of his body tensed. Sometimes his heart missed a beat at the time that his breathing stopped, and sometimes it pounded violently. It seemed that the symptoms became more and more unbearable.

He got out his med kit, with hands that spasmodically jerked uncontrollably. He fumbled out the same medication he'd given Murgatroyd. He took two of the pellets.

"In reason," he said coldly, "I ought to let you take what this damned thing would give you. But — here!"

Allison had panicked. The *idea* of a cattle fence suggested discomfort, of course, but it did not imply danger. The *experience* of a cattle fence, designed for huge hoofed beasts instead of men, was terrifying. Allison gasped. He made convulsive movements. Calhoun himself moved erratically. For one and a half seconds out of two, he could control his muscles. For half a second at a time, he could not. But he poked a pill into Allison's mouth.

"Swallow it!" he commanded. "Swallow!"

The ground-car rested tranquilly on the highway, which here went on for a mile and then dipped in a gentle incline and then rose once more. The totally level fields to right and left came to an end here. Native trees grew, trailing preposterously with long fronds. Brushwood hid much of the ground. That looked normal. But the lower, ground-covering vegetation was wilted and rotting.

Allison choked upon the pellet. Calhoun forced a second upon him. Murgatroyd looked inquisitively at first one and then the other of the two men. He said:

"Chee? Chee?"

Calhoun lay back in his seat, breathing carefully to keep alive. But he couldn't do anything

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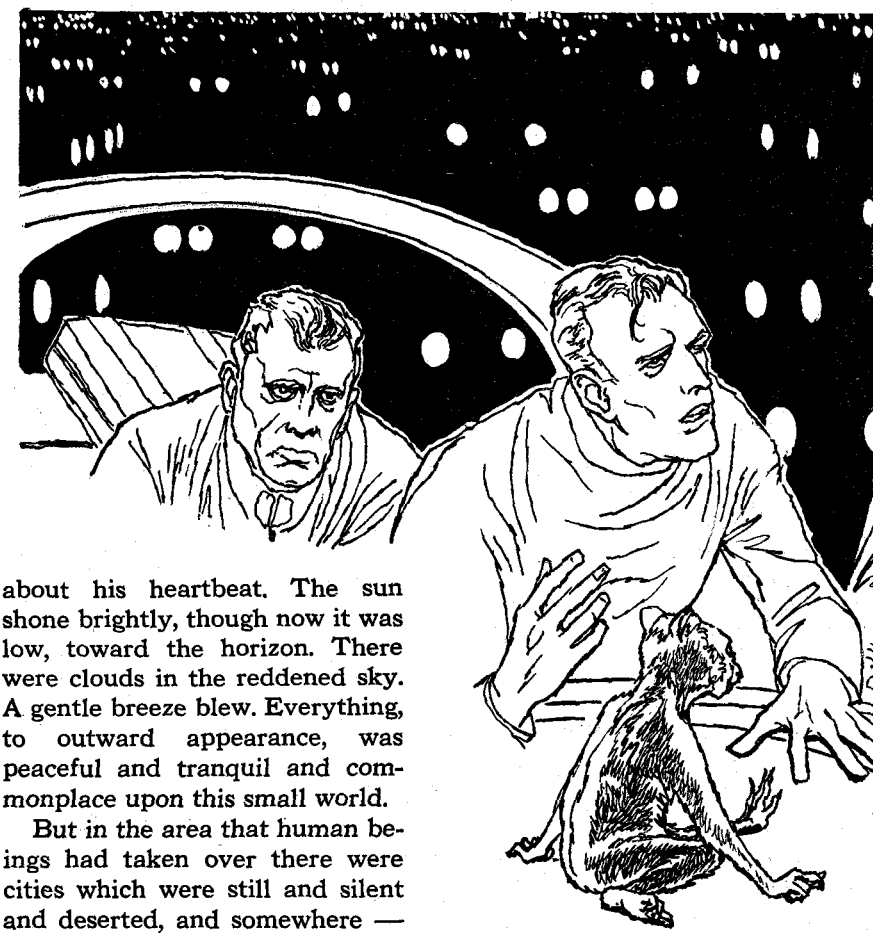

about his heartbeat. The sun shone brightly, though now it was low, toward the horizon. There were clouds in the reddened sky. A gentle breeze blew. Everything, to outward appearance, was peaceful and tranquil and commonplace upon this small world.

But in the area that human beings had taken over there were cities which were still and silent and deserted, and somewhere — somewhere! — the population of the planet waited uneasily for the latest of a series of increasingly terrifying phenomena to come to an end. Up to this time the strange, creeping, universal affliction had begun at one place, and moved slowly to another, and then diminished and ceased to be.

But this was the greatest and worst of the torments. And it hadn't ended. It hadn't diminished. After three days it continued at full strength at the place where previously it had stopped and died away.

The people of Maya were

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frightened. They couldn't return to their homes. They couldn't go anywhere. They hadn't prepared for an emergency to last for days. They hadn't brought supplies of food.

It began to look as if they were going to starve.

IV

CALHOUN was in very bad shape when the sports car came to the end of the highway.

First, all the multiple roadways of the route that had brought him here were joined by triple ribbons of road-surface from the north. For a space there were twenty-four lanes available to traffic. They flowed together, and then there were twelve. Here there was evidence of an enormous traffic concentration at some time now past. Brush and small trees were crushed and broken where cars had been forced to travel off the hard-surface roadways and through undergrowth. The twelve lanes dwindled to six, and the unpaved area on either side showed that innumerable cars had been forced to travel off the highway altogether. Then there were three lanes, and then two, and finally only a single ribbon of pavement where no more than two cars could run side by side. The devastation on either hand was astounding. All visible vegetation for half a mile to right and left was crushed and tangled. And then the narrow surfaced road ceased to be completely straight. It curved around a hillock — and here the ground was no longer perfectly flat — and came to an end.

And Calhoun saw all the

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ground-cars of the planet gathered and parked together.

There were no buildings. There were no streets. There was nothing of civilization but tens and scores of thousands of ground-cars. They were extraordinary to look at, stopped at random, their fronts pointed in all directions, their air-column tubes thrusting into the ground so that there might be trouble getting them clear again.

Parked bumper to bumper in closely placed lines, in theory twenty-five thousand cars could be parked on a square mile of ground. But there were very many times that number of cars here, and some places were unsuitable for parking, and there were lanes placed at random and there'd been no special effort to put the maximum number of cars in the smallest place. So the surface transportation system of the planet Maya spread out over some fifty sprawling square miles. Here, cars were crowded closely. There, there was much room between them. But it seemed that as far as one could see in the twilight there were glistening vehicles gathered confusedly, so there was nothing else to be seen but an occasional large tree rising from among them.

Calhoun came to the end of the surfaced road. He'd waited for the pellets he'd taken and given to Allison to have the effect they'd had on Murgatroyd. That had come about. He'd driven on. But the strength of the inductor field had increased to the intolerable. When he stopped the sports car he showed the effects of what he'd been through.

Figures on foot converged upon him instantly. There were eager calls.

"It's stopped? You got through? We can go back?"

Calhoun shook his head. It was just past sunset and many brilliant colorings showed in the western sky, but they couldn't put color into Calhoun's face. His cheeks were grayish and his eyes were deep-sunk, and he looked like someone in the last stages of exhaustion. He said heavily:

"It's still there. We came through. I'm Med Service. Have you got a government here? I need to talk to somebody who can give orders."

IF he'd asked two days earlier there would have been no answer, because the fugitives were only waiting for a disaster to come to an end. One day earlier, he might have found men with authority busily trying to arrange for drinking water for something like two millions of people, in the entire absence of wells or pumps or ways of making either. And if he'd been a day later, it is rather

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likely that he'd have found savage disorder. But he arrived at sundown three days after the flight from the cities. There was no food to speak of, and water was drastically short, and the fugitives were only beginning to suspect that they would never be able to leave this place — and that they might die here.

Men left the growing crowd about the sports car to find individuals who could give orders. Calhoun stayed in the car, resting from the unbearable strain he'd undergone. The ground-inductor cattle fence had been ten miles deep. One mile was not bad. Only Murgatroyd had noticed it. After two miles Calhoun and Allison suffered; but the medication strengthened them to take it. But there'd been a long, long way in the center of the induction-field in which existence was pure torment. Calhoun's muscles defied him for part of every two-second cycle, and his heart and lungs seemed constantly about to give up even the pretense of working. In that part of the cattle-fence field, he'd hardly dared drive faster than a crawl, in order to keep control of the car when his own body was uncontrollable. But presently the field strength lessened and ultimately ended.

Now Murgatroyd looked cordially at the figures who clustered about the car. He'd hardly suffered at all. He'd had half as much of the medication as Calhoun himself, and his body weight was only a tenth of Calhoun's. He'd made out all right. Now he looked expectantly at what became a jammed mass of crowding men about the vehicle that had come through the invisible barrier across the highway. They hoped desperately for news to produce hope. But Murgatroyd waited zestfully for somebody to welcome him and offer him cakes and sweets, and undoubtedly presently a cup of coffee.

But nobody did.

It was a long time before there was a stirring at the edge of the crowd. Night had fully fallen then, and for miles and miles in all directions lights in the ground cars of Maya's inhabitants glowed brightly. They drew upon broadcast power, naturally, for their motors and their lights. Off to one side someone shouted. Calhoun turned on his headlights for a guide. More shoutings. A knot of men struggled to get through the crowd. With difficulty, presently, they reached the car.

"They say you got through," panted a tall man, "but you can't get back. They say — "

Calhoun roused himself. Allison, beside him, stirred. The tall man panted again:

"I'm the planetary president. What can we do?"

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"First, listen," said Calhoun tiredly.

He'd had a little rest. Not much, but some. The actual work he'd done in driving three hundred-odd miles from Maya City was trivial. But the continuous, and lately violent, spasms of his heart and breathing muscles had been exhausting. He heard Murgatroyd say ingratiatingly, *"Chee-chee-chee-chee,"* and put his hand on the little animal to quiet him.

"The thing you ran away from," said Calhoun with effort, "is a type of ground-induction field using broadcast power from the grid. It's used on Texia to confine cattle to their pastures and to move them where they're wanted to be. But it was designed for cattle. It's a cattle fence. It could kill humans."

HE WENT on, his voice gaining strength and steadiness as he spoke. He explained, precisely, how a ground-induction field was projected in a line at a right angle to its source. It could be moved by adjustments of the apparatus by which it was projected.

"But — but if it uses broadcast power," the planetary president said urgently, "then if the power broadcast is cut off it has to stop! If you got through it coming here, tell us how to get through going back and we'll cut off the power broadcast ourselves! We've got to do something immediately. The whole planet's here. There's no food! There's no water! Something has to be done before we begin to die!"

"But," said Calhoun, "if you cut off the power you'll die anyway! You've got a couple of million people here, and you're a hundred miles from food. Without power you couldn't get to food or bring it here. Cut the power and you're still stranded here. Without power you'll die as soon as with it."

There was a sound from the listening men around. It was partly a growl and partly a groan.

"I've just found this out," said Calhoun. "I didn't know until the last ten miles exactly what the situation was, and I had to come here to be sure. Now I need some people to help me. It won't be pleasant. I may have enough medication to get a dozen people back through. It'll be safer if I take only six. Get a doctor to pick me six men. Good heart action. Sound lungs. Two should be electronics engineers. The others should be good shots. If you get them ready, I'll give them the same stuff that got us through. It's desensitizing medication, but it will do only so much. And try and find some weapons for them."

Voices murmured all around. Men hastily explained to other men what Calhoun had said. The

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creeping disaster before which they'd all fled, — it was not a natural catastrophe, but an artificial one! Men had made it! They'd been herded here and their wives and children were hungry because of something men had done!

A low-pitched, buzzing, humming sound came from the crowd about the sports car. For the moment, nobody asked what could be the motive for men to do what had been done. Pure fury filled the mob. Calhoun leaned closer to Allison.

"I wouldn't get out of the car if I were you," he said in a low tone. "I certainly wouldn't try to buy any real property at a low price!"

Allison shivered. There was a vast, vast stirring as the explanation passed from man to man. Figures moved away in the darkness. Lighted car windows winked as they moved through the obscurity. The population of Maya was spread out over very many square miles of what had been wilderness, and there was no elaborate communication system by which information could be spread quickly. But long before dawn there'd be nobody who didn't know that they'd fled from a man-made danger and were held here like cattle, behind a cattle fence, apparently abandoned to die.

ALLISON'S teeth chattered. He was a business man and up to now he'd thought as one. He'd made decisions in offices, with attorneys and secretaries and clerks to make the decisions practical and safe, without any concern for any consequences other than financial ones.

He saw possible consequences to himself, here and now. He'd landed on Maya because he considered the matter too important to trust to anybody else. Even riding with Calhoun on the way here, he'd only been elated and astonished at the success of the intended coup. He'd raised his aim. For a while he'd believed that he'd end as the sole proprietor of the colony on Maya, with every plant growing for his profit, and every factory earning money for him, and every inhabitant his employee. It had been the most grandiose possible dream. The details and the maneuvers needed to complete it flowed into his mind.

But now his teeth chattered. At ten words from Calhoun he would literally be torn to pieces by the raging men about him. His attache case with millions of credits in cash — it would be proof of whatever Calhoun chose to say. Allison knew terror down to the bottom of his soul. But he dared not move from Calhoun's side, even though a single sentence in

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the calmest of voices would destroy him, and he'd never faced actual, understood, physical danger before.

Presently men came, one by one, to take orders from Calhoun. They were able-bodied and grim-faced men. Two were electronics engineers, as he'd specified. One was a policeman. There were two mechanics and a doctor who was also amateur tennis champion of the planet. Calhoun doled out to them the pellets that reduced the sensitiveness of muscles to externally applied stimuli. He gave instructions. They'd go as far into the cattle fence as they could reasonably endure. Then they'd swallow the pellets and let them act. Then they'd go on. His stock of pellets was limited. He could give three to each man.

Murgatroyd squirmed disappointedly as this briefing went on. Obviously, he wasn't to make a social success here. He was annoyed, and he needed more space. Calhoun tossed Allison's attache case behind the seats. Allison was too terrified to protest. It still did not increase the space left on the front seat between Calhoun and Allison.

Four humming ground cars lifted eight inches off the ground and hovered there on columns of rushing air. Calhoun took the lead. His headlights moved down the single-lane road to which two joining twelve-lane highways had shrunk. Behind him, other headlights moved into line. Calhoun's car moved away into the darkness. The others followed.

Brilliant stars shone overhead. A cluster of thousands of suns, a hundred light-years away, made a center of illumination that gave Maya's night the quality of a vivid if diffused moonlight. The cars went on. Presently Calhoun felt the twitchings of minor muscular spasms. He was riding into the field which had been first devised for purposes remote from the herding of cattle or humans, but applied to the first use on the planet Texia, and now applied to the second here.

The road became two, and then four, and then eight lanes wide. Then four lanes swirled off to one side, and the remaining four presently doubled, and then widened again, and it was the twelve-lane turnpike that had brought Calhoun here from Maya City.

BUT the rhythmic interference with his body grew stronger. Allison had spoken not one single word while Calhoun conferred with the people of Maya beyond the highway. His teeth chattered as they started back. He didn't attempt to speak during the beginning of the ride through the cattle-fence field. His teeth chat-

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tered, and stopped, and chattered again, and at long last he panted despairingly:

"Are you going to let the thing kill me?"

Calhoun stopped. The cars behind him stopped. He gave Allison two pellets and took two himself. With Murgatroyd insistently accompanying him, he went along the cars which trailed him. He made sure the six men he'd asked for took their pellets and that they had an adequate effect. He went back to the sports car.

Allison whimpered a little when he and Murgatroyd got back in.

"I thought," said Calhoun conversationally, "that you might try to take off by yourself, just now. It would solve a problem for me. Of course it wouldn't solve any for you. But I don't think your problems have any solution, now."

He started the car up again. It moved forward. The other cars trailed dutifully. They went on through the starlit night. Calhoun noted that the effect of the cattle fence was less than it had been before. The first desensitizing pellets had not wholly lost their effect when he added to it. But he kept his speed low until he was certain the other drivers had endured the anguish of passing through the cattle-fence field.

Presently he was confident that the cattle field was past. He sent his car up to eighty miles an hour. The other cars followed faithfully. To a hundred. They did not drop behind. The car hummed through the night at top speed — a hundred and twenty, a hundred and thirty miles an hour. The three other cars' headlights faithfully kept pace with him.

Allison, said desperately, "Look! I — don't understand what's happened. You talk as if I'd planned all this. I — did have advance notice of a — a research project here. But it shouldn't have held the people there for days! Something went wrong! I only believed that people would want to leave Maya. I'd only planned to buy as much acreage as I could, and control of as many factories as possible. That's all! It was business! Only business!"

Calhoun did not answer. Allison might be telling the truth. Some businessmen would think it only intelligent to frighten people into selling their holdings below true value. Something of the sort happened every day in stock exchanges. But the people of Maya could have died!

For that matter, they still might. They couldn't return to their homes and food so long as broadcast power kept the cattle-fence in existence. But they could not return to their homes and food supplies if the power broadcast was cut off, either.

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Over all the night surface of the world of Maya there was light only on one highway at one spot, and a multitude of smaller, lesser lights where the people of Maya waited to find out whether they would live or die.

V

CALHOUN considered coldly. They were beyond what had been the farthest small city on the multiple highway. They would go on past now-starlit fields of plants native to Maya, passing many places where trucks loaded with the plants climbed up to the roadway and headed for the factories which made use of them. The fields ran for scores of miles along the highway's length. They reached out beyond the horizon, — perhaps scores of miles in that direction, too. There were thousands upon thousands of square miles devoted to the growing of the dark-green vegetation which supplied the raw materials for Maya's space exports. Some hundred-odd miles ahead, the small town of Tenochitlan lay huddled in the light of the distant star-cluster. Beyond that, more highway and Maya City. Beyond that —

Calhoun reasoned that the projector to make the induction cattle fence would be beyond Maya City, somewhere in the mountains the photograph in the spaceport building showed. A large highway went into those mountains for a limited distance only.

A ground-inductor projector field always formed at a right angle to the projector which was its source. It could be adjusted — the process was analogous to focusing — to come into actual being at any distance desired, and the distance could be changed. To drive the people of Maya City eastward, the projector of a cattle fence — about which they would know nothing; it would be totally strange and completely mysterious — the projector of the cattle fence would need to be west of the people to be driven. Logically, it would belong in the mountains. Practically, it would be concealed. Drawing on broadcast power to do its work, there would be no large power source needed to give it the six million kilowatts it required. It should be quite easy to hide beyond any quick or easy discovery. Hunting it out might require weeks of searching.

But the people beyond the end of the highway couldn't wait. They had no food, and holes scrabbled down to ground-water by men digging with their bare hands simply would not be adequate. The cattle fence had to be cut off immediately — while the broadcast of power had to be continued.

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Calhoun made an abrupt grunting noise. Phrasing the thing that needed to be done was practically a blueprint of how to do it. Simple! He'd need the two electronics engineers, of course. But that would be the trick . . .

He drove on at a hundred thrity miles an hour with his lips set wrily. The three other cars came behind him. Murgatroyd watched the way ahead. Mile after mile, half-minute after half-minute, the headlights cast brilliantly blinding beams before the cars. Murgatroyd grew bored. He said, "*Chee*!" in a discontented fashion and tried to curl up between Allison and Calhoun. There wasn't room. He crawled over the seat-back. He moved about, back there. There were rustling sounds. He settled down. Presently there was silence. Undoubtedly he had draped his furry tail across his nose and gone soundly off to sleep.

Allison spoke suddenly. He'd had time to think, but he had no practice in various ways of thinking.

"How much money have you got?" he asked.

"Not much," said Calhoun. "Why?"

"I — haven't done anything illegal," said Allison, with an unconvincing air of confidence, "but I could be put to some inconvenience if you were to accuse me before others of what you've accused me personally. You seem to think that I planned a criminal act. That the action I know of — the research project I'd heard of — that it became — that it got out of hand is likely. But I am entirely in the clear. I did nothing in which I did not have the advice of counsel. I am legally unassailable. My lawyers —"

"THAT'S none of business," Calhoun told him. "I'm a medical man. I landed here in the middle of what seemed to be a serious public health situation. I went to see what had happened. I've found out. I still haven't the answer, — not the whole answer anyway. But the human population of Maya is in a state of some privation, not to say danger. I hope to end it. But I've nothing to do with anybody's guilt or innocence of crime or criminal intent or anything else."

Allison swallowed. Then he said with smooth confidence:

"But you could cause me inconvenience. I would appreciate it if you would — would — "

"Cover up what you've done?" asked Calhoun.

"No! I've done nothing wrong. But you could simply use discretion. I landed by parachute to complete some business deals I'd arranged months ago. I will go through with them. I will leave on

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the next ship. That's perfectly open and above board. Strictly business. But you could make a — an unpleasing public image of me. Yet I have done nothing any other business man wouldn't do! I did happen to know of a research project —"

"I think," said Calhoun without heat, "that you sent men here with a cattle-fence device from Texia to frighten the people on Maya. They wouldn't know what was going on. They'd be scared; they'd want to get away. So you'd be able to buy up practically all the colony for the equivalent of peanuts. I can't prove that," he conceded, "but that's my opinion. But you want me not to state it. Is that right?"

"Exactly!" said Allison. He'd been shaken to the core, but he managed the tone and the air of a dignified man of business discussing an unpleasant subject with fine candor. "I assure you you are mistaken. You agree that you can't prove your suspicions. If you can't prove them, you shouldn't state them. That is simple ethics. You agree to that!"

Calhoun looked at him curiously.

"Are you waiting for me to tell you my price?"

"I'm waiting," said Allison reprovingly, "for you to agree not to cause me embarrassment. I won't be ungrateful. After all, I'm a person of some influence. I could do a great deal to your benefit. I'd be glad —"

"Are you working around to guess at a price I'll take?" asked Calhoun with the same air of curiosity.

He seemed much more curious than indignant, and much more amused than curious. Allison sweated suddenly. Calhoun didn't appear to be bribable. But Allison knew desperation.

"If you want to put it that way — yes," he said harshly. "You can name your own figure. I mean it!"

"I won't say a word about you," said Calhoun. "I won't need to. The characters who're operating your cattle fence will do all the talking that's necessary. Things all fit together, — except for one item. They've been dropping into place all the while we've been driving down this road."

"I said you can name your own figure!" Allison's voice was shrill. "I mean it! Any figure! Any!"

Calhoun shrugged.

"What would a Med Ship man do with money? Forget it!"

He drove on. The highway turnoff to Tenochitlan appeared. Calhoun went steadily past it. The other connection with the road through the town appeared. He left it behind.

Allison's teeth chattered again.

The buildings of Maya City began to appear, some twenty min-

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utes later. Calhoun slowed and the other cars closed up. He opened a window and called:

"We want to go to the landing-grid first. Somebody lead the way!"

A car went past and guided the rest assuredly to a ramp down from the now-elevated road, and through utterly dark streets, of which some were narrow and winding, and came out abruptly where the landing-grid rose skyward. At the bottom its massive girders looked huge and cyclopean in the starlight, but the higher courses looked like silver lace against the stars.

THEY went to the control building. Calhoun got out. Murgatroyd hopped out after him, dust clinging to his fur. He shook himself, and a ten-thousand-credit interstellar credit certificate fell to the ground. Murgatroyd had made a soft place for sleeping out of the contents of Allison's attache case. It was assuredly the most expensive if not the most comfortable sleeping cushion a *formal* ever had. Allison sat still as if numbed. He did not even pick up the certificate.

"I need you two electronics men," said Calhoun. Then he said apologetically to the others, "I only figured out something on the way here. I'd believed we might have to take some drastic action, come daybreak. But now I doubt it. I do suggest, though, that you turn off the car headlights and get set to do some shooting if anybody turns up. I don't know whether they will or not."

He led the way inside. He turned on lights. He went to the place where dials showed the amount of power actually being used of the enormous amount available. Those dials now showed an extremely small power drain, considering that the cities of a planet depended on the grid. But the cities were dark and empty of people. The demand needle wavered back and forth, rhythmically. Every two seconds the demand for power went up by six million kilowatts, approximately. The demand lasted for half a second, and stopped. For a second and a half the power in use was reduced by six million kilowatts. During this period only automatic pumps and ventilators and freezing equipment drew on the broadcast power for energy. Then the six-million-kilowatt demand came again for half a second.

"The cattle fence," said Calhoun, "works for half a second out of every two seconds. It's intermittent or it would simply paralyze animals that wandered into it. Or people. Being intermittent, it drives them out instead. There'll be tools and parts for

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equipment here, in case something needs repair. I want you to make something new."

The two electronics technicians asked questions.

"We need," said Calhoun, "an interruptor that will cut off the power broadcast for the half-second the ground-induction field is supposed to be on. Then it should turn on the broadcast power for the second and a half the cattle fence is supposed to be off. That will stop the cattle-fence effect, and I think a ground car should be able to work with power that's available for three half-seconds out of four."

The electronics men blinked at him. Then they grinned and set to work. Calhoun went exploring. He found a lunch box in a desk with three very stale sandwiches in it. He offered them around.

It appeared that nobody wanted to eat while their families — at the end of the highway — were still hungry.

The electronics men called on the two mechanics to help build something. They explained absorbedly to Calhoun that they were making a cutoff which would adjust to any sudden six-million-kilowatt demand, no matter what time interval was involved. A change in the tempo of the cattle-fence cycle wouldn't bring it back on.

"That's fine!" said Calhoun. "I wouldn't have thought of that!"

He bit into a stale sandwich and went outside. Allison sat limply, despairingly, in his seat in the car.

"The cattle fence is going off," said Calhoun without triumph. "The people of the city will probably begin to get here around sunrise."

"I — I did nothing legally wrong!" said Allison, dry-throated. "Nothing! They'd have to prove that I knew what the — consequences of the research project would be. That couldn't be proved! It couldn't! So I've done nothing legally wrong . . ."

Calhoun went inside, observing that the doctor who was also tennis champion, and the policeman who'd come to help him, were keeping keen eyes on the city and the foundations of the grid and all other places from which trouble might come.

There was a fine atmosphere of achievement in the power-control room. The power itself did not pass through these instruments, but relays here controlled buried massive conductors which supplied the world with power. And one of the relays had been modified. When the cattle-fence projector closed its circuit, the power went off. When the ground-inductor went off, the power went on. There was no longer a barrier across the highways leading to

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the east. It was more than probable that ground cars could run on current supplied for one and a half seconds out of every two. They might run jerkily, but they would run.

HALF AN HOUR later, the amount of power drawn from the broadcast began to rise smoothly and gradually. It could mean only that cars were beginning to move.

Forty-five minutes later still, Calhoun heard stirrings outside. He went out. The two men on guard gazed off into the city. Something moved there. It was a ground-car, running slowly and without lights. Calhoun said undisturbedly:

"Whoever was running the cattle fence found out their gadget wasn't working. Their lights flickered, too. They came to see what was the matter at the landing-grid. But they've seen the lighted windows. Got your blasters handy?"

But the unlighted car turned and raced away. Calhoun only shrugged.

"They haven't a prayer," he said. "We'll take over their apparatus as soon as it's light. It'll be too big to destroy, and there'll be fingerprints and such to identify them as the men who ran it. And they're not natives. When the police start to look for the strangers who were living where the cattle-fence projector was set up . . . They can go into the jungles where there's nothing to eat, or they can give themselves up."

He moved toward the door of the control building once more. Allison said desperately:

"They'll have hidden their equipment. You'll never be able to find it!"

Calhoun shook his head in the starlight.

"Anything that can fly can spot it in minutes. Even on the ground one can walk almost straight to it. You see, something happened they didn't count on. That's why they've left it turned on at full power. The earlier, teasing uses of the cattle fence were low-power. Annoying, to start with, and uncomfortable the second time, and maybe somewhat painful the third. But the last time it was full power."

He shrugged. He didn't feel like a long oration. But it was obvious. Something had killed the plants of a certain genus of which small species were weeds that destroyed Earth-type grasses. The ground-cover plants — and the larger ones, like the one Calhoun had seen decaying in a florist's shop which had had to be grown in a cage — the ground-cover plants had motile stems and leaves and blossoms. They

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were cannibals. They could move their stems to reach, and their leaves to enclose, and their flowers to devour other plants, even perhaps small animals. The point, though, was that they had some limited power of motion. Earth-style sensitive vines and flycatcher plants had primitive muscular tissues. The local ground-cover plants had them too. And the cattle-fence field made those tissues contract spasmodically. Powerfully. Violently. Repeatedly. Until they died of exhaustion. The full-power cattle-fence field had exterminated Mayan ground-cover plants all the way to the end of the east-bound highway. And inevitably — and very conveniently — also up to the exact spot where the cattle-fence field had begun to be projected. There would be an arrow-shaped narrowing of the wiped-out ground-cover plants where the cattle-field had been projected. It would narrow to a point which pointed precisely to the cattle-fence projector.

"Your friends," said Calhoun, "will probably give themselves up and ask for mercy. There's not much else they can do."

Then he said:

"They might even get it. D'you know, there's an interesting side effect of the cattle fence. It kills the plants that have kept earth-type grasses from growing here. Wheat can be grown here now, whenever and as much as the people please. It should make this a pretty prosperous planet, not having to import all its bread."

THE ground cars of the inhabitants of Maya City did begin to arrive at sunrise. Within an hour after daybreak, very savagely intent persons found the projector and turned it off.

By noon there was still some anger on the faces of the people of Maya, but there'd been little or no damage, and life took up its normal course again. Murgatroyd appreciated the fact that things went back to normal. For him it was normal to be welcomed and petted when the Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty* touched ground. It was normal for him to move zestfully in admiring human society, and to drink coffee with great gusto.

And while Murgatroyd moved in human society, enjoying himself hugely, Calhoun went about his business. Which, of course, was conferences with planetary health officials, politely receiving such information as they thought important, and tactfully telling them about the most recent developments in medical science.

What else was a Med Ship man for?

— MURRAY LEINSTER

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